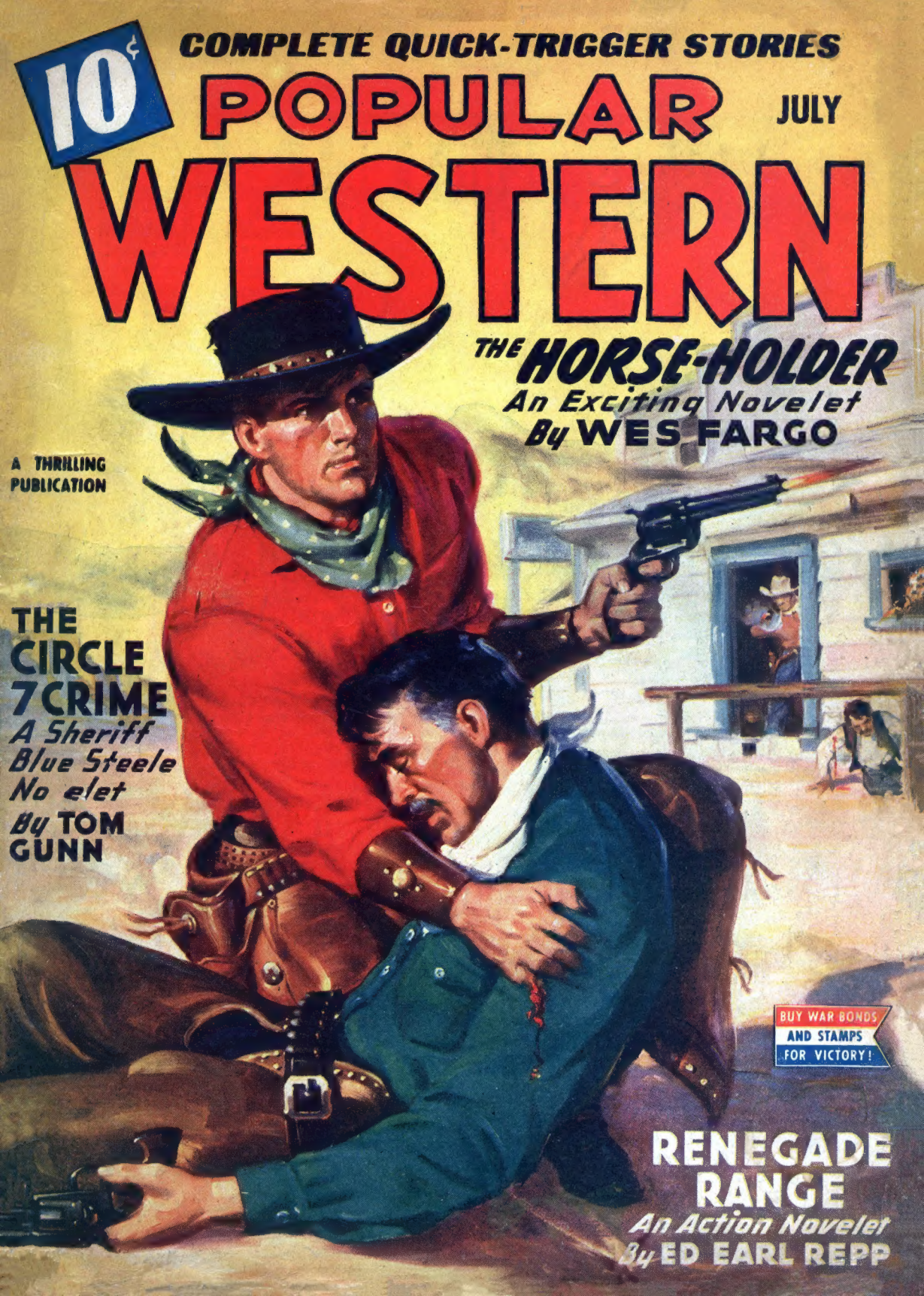
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The HOME CORRAL

A DEPARTMENT FOR READERS

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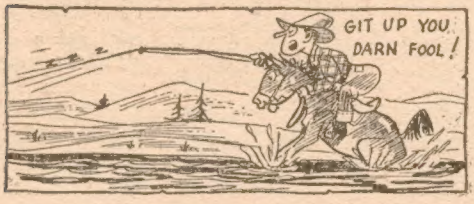
HOWDY, hombres and hombresses! To continue our chats on fishing, I want to state that as a general rule cowpunchers don't lug fancy fishing tackle. Their usual equipment is a cheap but almost indestructible telescoping trout rod, a hank of enameled line on almost any sort of a reel, some bait hooks and leader material.

Regardless of any other reason, cowfolks out on summer range won't risk a delicate fifty dollars' worth of fine fly rod in saddle, riding rough mountain trails.

Yet I've never met up with bad luck, packing mine as I do in a metal case carried in a saddle rifle boot.

Fishing on Horseback

Trout-fishing from saddle puts a keen new twist on an old sport. It calls for better-than-average casting ability, as well as good horsemanship. This fishing from saddle method isn't suited to streams where the fish run too big to be lifted from water without



netting. But it's usually creek fishing on the high range, where the trout are plentiful but only pan-size.

A man can fish a heap of stream on horseback. And he's up in the air enough to avoid the brushy fringe that hems in most creeks, which is a convenience on the back-cast.

Most dudes wonder why the proverbially shy trout don't scare when a horse clomps and splashes and clatters square in among 'em. The truth is, fish are less afraid of a horse wading the stream than a man pussy-footing along the bank.

This is specially noticeable in a stock country, or in a game region where deer and such come to drink. There the fish are used to big, looming visitors. Their natural enemies are small and lurk at the water's edge.

This trait of wild trout was brought home to me in an unforgettable way up on Lost River, Idaho. Several evenings I had fished a stretch of water where a fast riffle entered a long, flowing pool.

There were big rainbow in there. I saw them breaking—wallopers around 20 inches long.

The side that I was on was mushy meadow ground that formed a bank about five feet high, without any willows or other concealment. I tried time and again to approach the big fish from that side, even standing back well out of sight and casting.

But invariably the wily rainbow quit feeding the minute I began my approach. They wouldn't touch my most effective flies.

I knew that on boggy ground a man's footfalls carry a long way and will alarm wild creatures and fish. What I did not know then was that sometimes a fish in a stream can see the fisherman when the fisherman can't see the fish. The phenomena is caused by the sunlight falling at just such an angle as to cause refraction and produce a miniature image of the fisherman on the water's surface.

The light condition happened to exist at the time o' day that I came onto that pool, each late afternoon. I don't mean that my shadow fell on the water. I was facing the sun.

I cast and cussed and presently squatted to ponder. The idea hit me when I saw a deer slip out of the woods across stream, walk out onto a gravelly shallow, lower his head and drink. All around him the trout leaped and fed.

Refracted Light

With that lesson demonstrated, I sashayed upstream to a wading place, crossed and headed down yonder bank. I came to my big fish place. I waded in, working out a short, careful cast. I saw a swirl about thirty feet away. I dropped my fly on it.

Bang! The weight of that fierce strike jarred me to the heels. In a split-second, standing there to my middle in icy water, I was doing battle with a magnificent walloper.

I took three of them in that one spot, all I wanted to lug back to camp with the catch I already had. Those big rainbow gave me a couple of hours of excitement I'll be as slow

(Continued on page 8)

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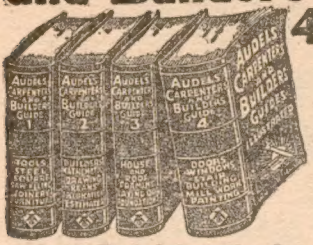

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THE HOME CORRAL

(Continued from page 6)

in forgetting as the lesson that came with it. The lesson of refracted light.

A Mystery Solved

In connection with this has come to me the solution of a mystery that has fooled generations of trout fishermen. It also has to do with the tricks of sunlight.

It's a well-worn axiom that trout do not rise to a fly till shadows fall on the water.

"So they cannot be seen by kingfishers, hawks and other enemies that pounce down," the average fisherman will explain.

But that explanation isn't logical. Many predators, particularly owls, see better in a fading light.

Mr. Average Fisherman in meeting that query will state another stand-by:

"Flyfishing isn't good in bright sunlight because fish can see line and leader, and also the fisherman."

Well, to examine that statement, put yourself in the trout's place. He's in the water, looking up through swirls, through a wind-roughened surface, and sometimes through water that carries a slight amount of silt or other impurities. With the strong light on it, the water gives the same effect, to the trout's eye, as you or I get by looking through a haze or through dust into direct light.

Therefore, it's reasonable to believe that trout are wary about surface feeding in strongly-lighted water because they *cannot* see well under such conditions! They are cautious, not because they see too well, but because their vision at such a time is undependable!

Yes, folks, there's plenty for a trout fisherman to think about, to figure out according to his own ability.

Bronc-Busting

But to continue with this business of fishing from horseback. It has some thrills not furnished by the fish. I call to mind one. Suppose you strike at a small trout that nips but misses the hook. Line and leader flip back. The small, sharp barb sinks into your criitter's shoulder, flank or rump.

Right sudden, then, your fishing trip and deep-thinking on the eternal mysteries of Nature turn into a bronc-busting contest. The chances are that you'll wind up telescoped like your steel rod, somewhere on the hard, unyielding adjacent landscape, with your line wound around your neck and a long, limpy hike between you and camp.

Whenever I think about horseback fishing it arouses gentle memories of a cowhand named Marvin that I met up on the Payette. Marvin liked to fish and he rode a fine cutting and roping horse.

Marv and I were saddle-fishing one afternoon when he hooked onto an old Dolly Vardon, gosh knows how big.

That fish started out like a yearling at the end of a lariat. Marv tried to follow and give line. But that cutting pony of his hadn't been taught to work thataway. Marv's horse laid back and angled away to bring that line tight, as he would a rope.

Marv's reel was already about to give off smoke. With the horse's maneuver added to the fish's speed downstream, the line came to the bitter end with Marv whooping and rib-thumping his well-trained nag. Then all at once my cowboy friend was waving an empty rod, which, after a moment's thought, he went to work with like a buggy whip on that dutiful but befuddled horse.

That was the end of a big fish the end of Marv's rod and the end of a pleasant afternoon. And it was pretty near the end of a good cowpony.

Some Tackle!

On the Snake below Twin Falls they tell a yarn about a man that fished for those big sturgeon. And plenty big they were. They busted all the tackle he could rig together.

As a final resort this man baited a hay

hook, attached it to a log chain leader, then put on rope line hitched to a singletree and a good plow horse.

It's a long time between bites, sturgeon fishing. The man got thirsty and left his horse grazing on a flat by the river while he went into Hagerman to get himself something cold.

When he came back the rope was gone. The singletree was gone. And the horse was gone! He never saw any of 'em again.

To be honest with you, hombres and hom-

(Continued on page 74)

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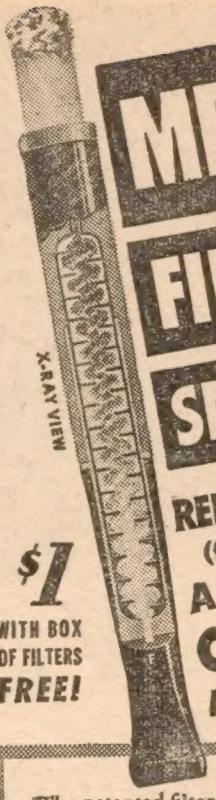

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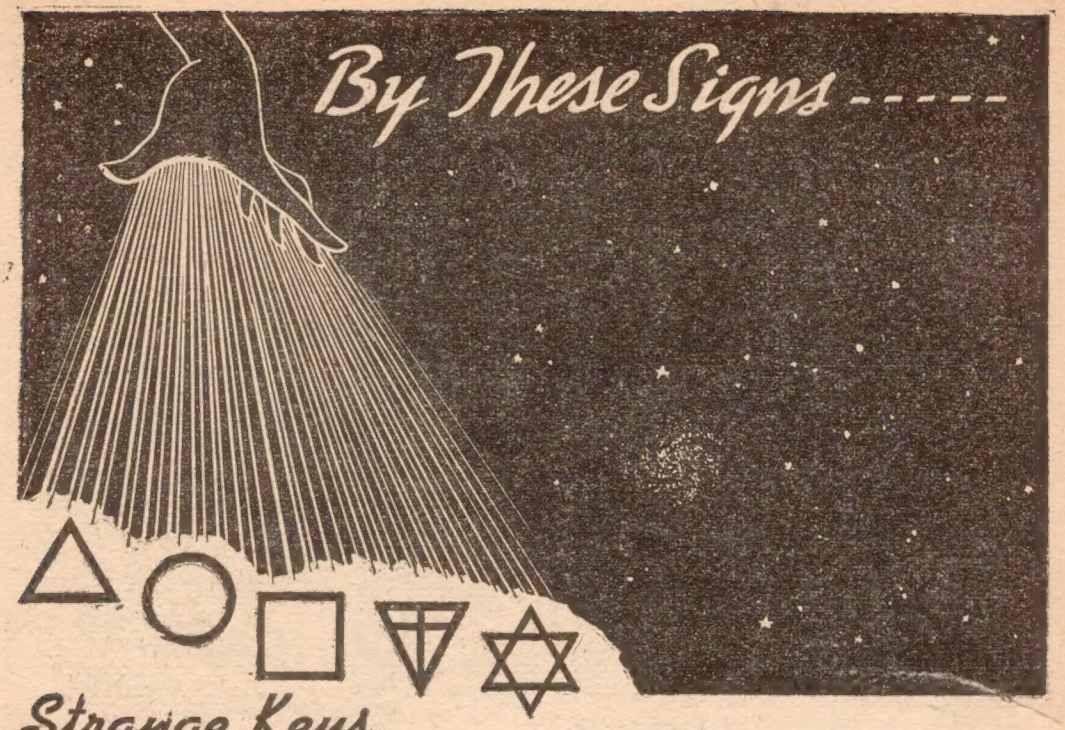

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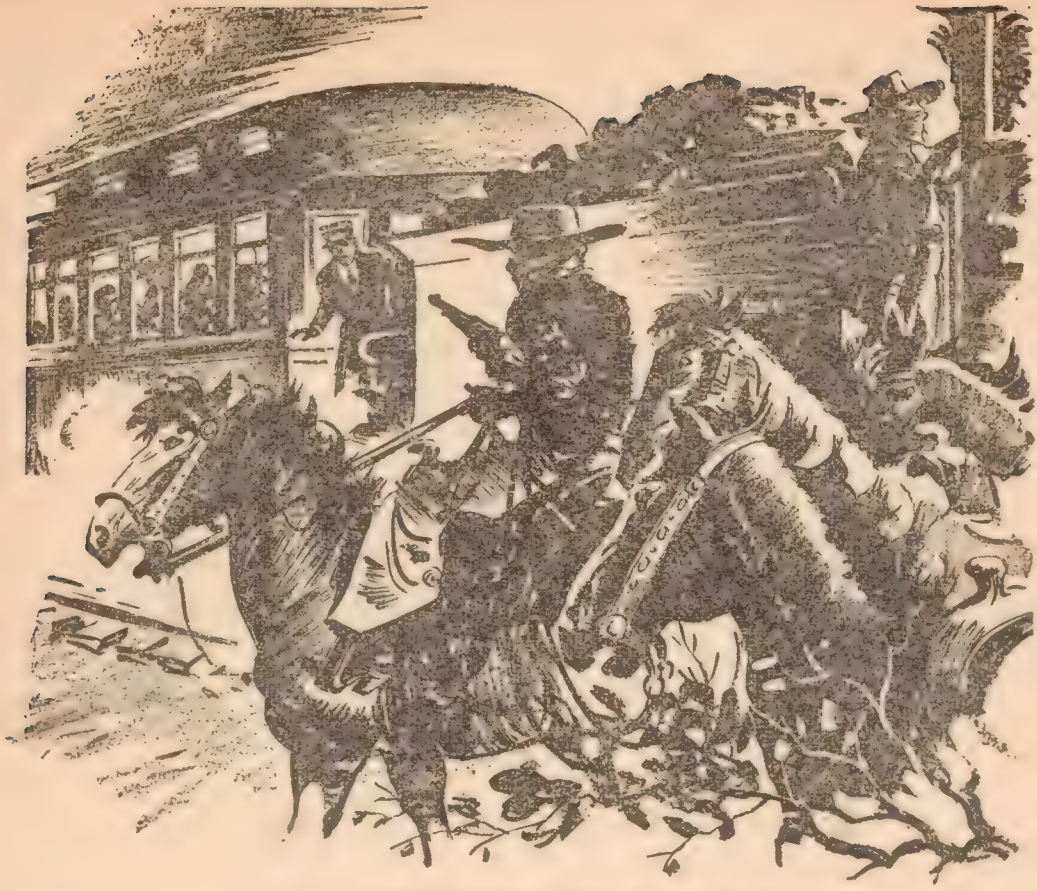

At the conductor's startled yelp, Buck whipped up his Colt

The Horse-Holder

By WES FARGO

Buck Harmon was stamped with the owlhoot brand from the start—but a stranger pointed the way to a new life!

CHAPTER I

Hold-up at the Water-tank

THE night, as Joe-dad would have said, was as big as all Outdoors. The moon had set, but that only left the stars twice as bright. The breeze brought the perfume of growing, green things, and the flowers of the wild plum near the water-tank. The champ of the horses at their bits, the faint tinkle of bit-chain and spurs, made a sort of music in the dark.

It made Buck Harmon—that had been Joe-dad's name, so Buck had taken it, too—almost forget what they were there for. It made him want to whistle. Before he could stop himself,

AN EXCITING COMPLETE ACTION NOVELET

he had trilled the opening bar of "Buffalo Gals."

The curse of "Wolf" Sarpy stopped him like a slap.

"Stop that noise, Buck! Any fool knows whistlin' 'fore a job is bad luck—and here it is, almost train time!"

The voice of Ike Nard rose in a gloomy plaint. "Let 'im whistle. I wish I could. I ain't never had the creeps before, but I got 'em now. . . . Listen!"

Like a wail in the night, mournful as the wind through a broken jug, came the sound.

Whoo-rooo! Whoorooo! Whoo-rooo!

"Blowin' for Whisky Sidin'," said the "Deacon." "That's the fireman whistlin' to that nester's gal he's sparkin'."

The train would be at the water-tank in three or four minutes now.

"Everybody got it straight now?" Wolf Sarpy shot out, his voice like the snapping of a steel trap. "The Deacon and Big John take the engine. Ike and me take the express car. Cherokee watches the off-side to see no tough passengers get off and try to drygulch us. Buck holds the hosses, like always."

Buck creaked in his saddle. His voice, just changing—he was between fourteen to fifteen —broke as he made his protest. "Why can't we tie the hosses? I'm tired of missin' all the fun. I can shoot as good as any the other fellers—better'n some, Joe-dad used to say."

"Yuh'll set the leather and hold these other hosses!" snapped Wolf Sarpy. "Yuh tryin' to tell me how to run a hold-up? I told yuh plenty times yuh don't get in regular till yuh've killed yore man."

"How can I, when yuh never give me no chance?"

"Shut up! Man ain't growed up till he's killed his man, 'specially in this business. Yuh can't really count on a feller till he's got his neck in the same noose as the rest of us. If yuh're hankerin' for action, yuh can shoot the car windows out on this side. That'll help keep the dudes down inside."

AGAIN the engine whistle whooped its mournful *whoo-whoorooo!*

Wolf Sarpy swung out of saddle with a tinkle of spurs.

"Better get across the tracks, Deacon, where the engine'll stop. Uncouple her, and take her down to that canyon where yore hoss is tied. Don't forget to bust that gauge glass 'fore yuh leave. Cherokee, get movin'. Come on, Ike."

They faded into the looming shadow of the water-tank, and Buck was left alone, his tingling nerves jumping to each slow *sput-sput* of the dripping water from the tank.

A fiery eye leaped into sight over the ridge crest. Then Buck caught the distant rattle of the exhaust, the clanking music of the wheels. Old Eighty-eight was rolling tonight.

The reddish-yellow eye of the locomotive headlight tilted to the track as she took the downgrade, and Buck could pick out the glint of the shining rails, could see the rows of lighted dots that marked the car windows, trailing the headlight like a comet tail.

Then all at once the tattoo of Eighty-eight's exhaust changed to a grumbling pant, the brakes shrieked as they chewed sparks from the rims, and easily, unerringly, the engineer halted the panting iron horse.

Clambering on top of the tender, the fireman pulled the spout down and tripped the valve. The rush and hiss of cascading water came hollowly.

Buck tensed, waiting for the first sound of the Deacon or of Wolf Sarpy.

A sound came, but it was from the engineer —a startled exclamation, an oath. The oath was chopped short by the Deacon's icy command:

"Get 'em up and back away from that whistle cord! I'll bust yuh if yuh touch it! Fireman, turn off that water, and come on down here in the cab—with yore hands up! Now, Big John, jerk that couplin' pin!"

There came the clank of the pin, the hiss of the broken air-connection, then the clank of the wheels and side-rods as the Deacon shifted the Johnson bar and opened the throttle. With gathering speed the locomotive and tender cut loose from the train and rolled away into the night.

Buck's gun was already out of holster and the hammer thumbed back. For at the front door of the first passenger coach the looming figure of the conductor showed.

"Hey!" came his startled shout. "What in thunder—"

With a yelp, Buck whipped up his Colt.

"Back inside, yuh old coot!"

The gun in Buck's hand roared and bucked. With the thud of the bullet just over his head, the conductor gave a terrified squawk and almost fell back through the doorway.

Buck grinned, and looked along the row of lighted coach windows for further game. Cherokee was yelling and slapping bullets along the coach windows on the farther side, which promptly tumbled any venturesome passenger to the floor.

"Open up, cuss yuh!" Wolf Sarpy's voice rose in fierce threat at the express car sidedoor. "If yuh don't, I got enough dynamite here to blow it and you both to Kingdom Come!"

Buck could hear the express messenger's muffled curses.

"Hold on—wait! I'll open it, but it'll take a minute. It's locked!"

"Then bust the lock!" Wolf's voice dropped a trifle. "Ike, get ready to climb in. You know what to do."

The heavy door creaked, and slid part open with a grating rasp. Buck could see Ike's vague figure move into the ray of yellow lamplight inside the express car.

Then that light was eclipsed by an orange-

Looping the reins on his wrist, Buck tried to haul the Deacon upright

and-red flash from that half-open door. It hammered Ike down as the thunder crash of the messenger's sawed-off shotgun shattered the night.

Spitting into the shotgun smoke like fiery tongues, Wolf Sarpy's six-gun made instant answer. With a choked groan, the messenger pitched out of the car door almost at Wolf's feet.

"Try to drygulch us, huh?" Wolf's voice was cruel, grating. "I hope yuh lie there and bleed a long time, cuss yuh!"

Then Wolf Sarpy was clawing up and inside the car.

At the cold-blooded tones, and at the sight of the two lumps that were Ike Nard and the messenger, Buck's stomach churned and twisted inside him. Wolf had said a fellow couldn't come into the gang until he had killed a man. And that was the way a man looked after you killed him—just a lump lying crumpled on the ground.

The .45 Colt felt heavy in Buck's hand. He lowered it and clung to the saddle-horn, expecting every minute to feel deathly sick.

Maybe it was the sight of the passenger behind the coach's glass window, not thirty feet away, that kept Buck from being sick. The passenger was a young cowboy, judging by the Stetson and bright shirt and neckerchief he wore. And his hair was carrot-red, where it showed under the brim of his Stetson. But what caught Buck's attention was what the cowboy was doing with his right hand.

For that hand was pulling something from the waistband of his trousers. The yellow light from the coach's oil lamps glinted on the blue barrel of a Frontier model Colt. With a lightning glance around, the red-headed cowboy laid the gun on the opposite seat and covered it with the wide brim of his Stetson.

Buck felt his heart bumping. If any of the gang showed a careless head in that car, he was likely to collect trouble from that hidden gun.

Buck raised his gun. Here was the chance Wolf Sarpy had spoken of. The chance to kill a man. Any one of the gang would do it, and grin as he pulled trigger.

But Joe-dad wouldn't have done it. For the red-headed cowboy now was sitting back in his seat, casually rolling a cigarette, his hands a yard away from that gun. It would be like murder, popping him, all unsuspecting, through that glass window.

"When a man gets to drygulchin'," Joe-dad used to say, "he's lower than a belly-crawlin' sidewinder."

Buck lowered his gun, but he kept careful watch on that red-headed passenger while he waited for Wolf Sarpy to drop the finish curtain on the hold-up.

Wolf was throwing things out of the express car door—boxes, packages, sacks. Buck's stomach squirmed again as one of the sacks fell squarely on top of Ike Nard. Wizened little Ike, who'd had the creeps about tonight's job.

Then Buck realized that Ike wasn't dead yet. For at the thud of the bag, there came a croaking groan, a half-gasp. It wasn't the messenger who was dying hard. It was Ike Nard—Ike who had helped Buck cook the meals, who had wanted Buck to keep on whistling.

Then Wolf Sarpy was out of the express door, scrunching toward that front car. Maybe he was going to clean the passengers of their watches and wallets. It would be like Wolf, greedy, never satisfied.

But in that car was the red-headed cowboy, and that hideout gun.

Buck slid from saddle, twisted the reins of all the horses into one knot, and fastened them to a scraggly limb. Then he was running like a rabbit toward the car steps at the far end, not the ones that Wolf was already climbing.

There were other ways to prove you were a ring-tailed he-man, without potting an empty-handed cowboy through a window.

By the time Buck entered the vestibule, Wolf Sarpy was standing in the aisle, his gun muzzle swiveling from side to side.

"All you dudes," he ordered, "pitch yore watches and wallets in the middle of the aisle. Hustle! I ain't got much time."

Wallets and time-pieces began to drop in the aisle. Wolf Sarpy grinned, waved his gun at a white-faced drummer.

"Scrape up all that stuff in yore hat and fetch it to me," he ordered. "Rest of yuh keep yore hands up. First funny move, and I drop the man that makes it."

Most of the passengers were drummers, tenderfeet, Easterners, even a woman or two. They were like cowed sheep—all but that cowboy with the hideout gun.

The drummer was coming toward Wolf, holding his hat that spilled over with wallets, watches and chains. Wolf took two steps forward to meet him.

Buck thumbed his hammer back again, and waited.

JUST as Wolf passed the red-headed cowboy, the redhead lunged, scooped the gun from beneath the Stetson, jammed it into Wolf Sarpy's kidneys.

"All right—now *you* get 'em up!" he snapped in a crackling voice.

Wolf froze, his eyes going wide. His hand, with the gun, made a half-jerk, then stopped.

And then Buck lined his own gun on the cowboy's back, and for once his voice sounded deep, not cracked in the middle.

"Get 'em up yoreself, redhead! I got a bead on yore backbone!"

Wolf's mouth relaxed with relief. But only for a moment. For in that moment the carrot-topped cowpuncher drawled an answer.

"Yuh can shoot any time yuh feel like it, feller. But I got this hammer thumbed back, and this gun ain't got no trigger. She goes off whether yuh get me or not—and she takes this wolf-jawed gent with me wherever I go!"

CHAPTER II

New Recruit

IT WAS a stand-off. And while Buck hesitated, not knowing what to do, Wolf Sarpy solved the problem. His voice rose in a hoarse croak, the like of which Buck had never heard from him.

"Don't shoot, Buck! Wait a minute!" He half-turned his snarling face over his shoulder. "What yuh want, feller? You ain't no John Law."

The redhead laughed mirthlessly. "Me, I just want to make talk with yuh for a minute. But outside, not here."

He grabbed his hat with one hand, the other keeping the gun in Sarpy's ribs.

"Shove that gun back in the leather, then get yore hands up again and head for the door. And remember, I can let go this hammer quicker'n you can unlimber yore gun."

Buck stared as Wolf Sarpy grudgingly obeyed. The redhead did not even give a glance back to see whether a gun was still aimed at his backbone or not. Buck hurried after them, his Colt clenched in his hand.

Outside, Big John was coming back from helping Cherokee after uncoupling the engine. Sarpy seemed to take new courage from his presence, though he kept his hands lifted.

"Now, what yuh want?" he rasped. "And make it quick!"

"That's easy." The redhead chuckled. "I was fixin' to blow that express car myself. But seein' as yuh beat me to it, looks like the only fair thing is to join up with yuh."

"Yuh was figgerin' to hold up Eighty-eight, lone-handed?" Sarpy exploded.

"Why not?" Redhead shrugged. "Jesse James done it. But if yuh don't believe it, my hoss is tied right t'other side that water-tank."

Slow-witted Big John seemed not to take it in. Cherokee must have thought the man with Wolf was Ike Nard. He had not seen Ike shot.

"Git the express all cleaned out, Ike?" he grunted as he came from the rear. "Then what we waitin' for, Wolf?"

"Ike's blowed to tarnation by the messenger's scatter-gun," growled Wolf Sarpy. "This here feller is a passenger that wants to throw in with us."

Cherokee's surprised exclamation was chopped off by the redhead.

"Looks like I'm joinin' just in time. This here Ike's dead—I take his place. Or do we argue some more with this gun in yore back?"

Wolf Sarpy let out an oath. "We can talk about that later. Let's get out of here. Come on, let's pack up the stuff."

But as they moved ahead to the pile of stuff beneath the express car door, the passenger shook his red head.

"Count me out on them mailbags. I don't want no part of 'em."

Sarpy cursed, though it was tempered somewhat by the fact that in the dark he couldn't tell whether the gun still covered him.

"Yuh tryin' to tell me my business?"

"Not a-tall. Yuh're the ramrod. But them Gov'ment mail detectives is a different breed of bloodhound from the railroad's Pinkerton men. Pinkerton railroad man'll ease up when the trail leaves the right-o'-way, but a Gov'ment bloodhound'll track till Hades freezes over."

"Ike had a hunch," Big John put in, "and we done had enough bad luck tonight. I say, leave the mail alone. Me, I wanta take a last look at Ike."

But as he bent over the crumpled form, Ike groaned.

"Ike ain't dead!" cried Big John. "Get a hoss and load him on! Ike ain't dead!"

Buck already was running for the horses. When he brought them back, Big John hoisted the groaning Ike onto the saddle, tied him across it. Cherokee and Wolf were lashing the boxes and packages onto the pack-horses, and the strange redhead was bringing up a long-barreled horse from beyond the tank.

Swiftly they finished the job, swung into saddles.

"Get on ahead with the pack-hosses, John," said Sarpy. "I'll bring up the drag with Ike. I don't want to ride too fast, with him bleedin'."

The slow-witted giant swung the loaded pack animals into motion. Cherokee swung in on the other flank. Buck followed, and to his surprise the redhead fell in at his stirrup. Wolf Sarpy, with the wounded man, came on more slowly behind.

A hundred yards on, Big John spurred into the shallow stream that was the water source for the water-tank. Splashing in the shallow water, they rode for an hour. Wolf Sarpy had by now dropped out of sight and hearing.

AT a ford in the stream for cattle, Big John turned off up the road toward the hills. A mile further on, he turned off again where a rocky ridge gave little ground for hoofmarks to show.

The Deacon cut in with his mount still panting from the ride from where he had left the disabled engine. Big John told him the news in a few words, then they rode on in silence.

Wolf Sarpy rode up from the rear, leading a horse. But the led horse's saddle was now empty.

"Died two-three miles back. He was half-blowed apart. So I left him where the possemen couldn't find him, and rode on to catch up."

From Big John came a husky sigh. "It ain't goin' to seem right without Ike. But he knew his time was up. He had the creeps."

Buck felt the icy clawing at his stomach again. So that was what happened when, instead of killing a man, you got killed yoreself. Chucked off in some hole, for the coyotes to pick.

He didn't hear the Deacon's half-whispered curse.

"Wolf, yuh lobo! Yuh mean yuh didn't want no wounded man to have to nurse! Yuh was goin' to bring in Joe, that other time, too—and he died on the way! Died from nothin' but a bullet-hole like I've seen lots of men get well from!"

Buck heard nothing of that, for as he rode on he was mentally going over his own short young life—his life that might end all too soon if he got killed himself, instead of killing a man.

Joe-dad hadn't been Buck's real dad at all. He had just been a saddle-tramp named Joe. Buck couldn't ever remember having any folks at all, much less a dad. All he could ever remember was slaving around mine camps, washing dishes in Chinese restaurants, and swamping out saloons, all of which work brought more knocks and blows than it brought money.

In fact, Buck had never known even a kind word until that night when Joe, rambling through, had dropped into a big game at Irish Mike's, had made a killing, and had decided that Buck had brought him the luck along with the new deck of cards.

"Green eyes, and more freckles than a pinto," he had said, grinning as he inspected Buck. "She's a lucky combination. How'd yuh like to saddle up an' ride? I got a extra hoss an' gear."

For two years they had roamed the land, sometimes flush, sometimes busted, and Buck had loved it. He couldn't remember just when he had come to call the puncher "Joe-dad," and then only to himself. Joe would have taken a quirt to him if he had said it out loud. But a fellow hankers to have some folks.

Joe-dad could out-rope, out-ride, and outshoot any cowboy Buck ever saw, but he didn't work at cowboy work. Generally he gambled in the cowtowns, descending to cowpunching only when the run of the cards had been too long against him, and then only working long enough to make another little stake.

Until that bad day when Joe-dad had got his thumb and fingers caught in his dally welter with an eight-hundred pound fighting bronc on the other end. He hadn't lost the fingers, but they were no more good for dealing cards.

"It's the whole hog now or die," Joe-dad had said, shaking his head. "I'm too old a dog to learn new tricks. Yuh can stay on here regular as a jingler, Buck. I spoke to the foreman. But I'm ridin'."

"When do we ride?" Buck had answered. And that had been all.

It was two weeks after that that they had ridden through a little town on the edge of the mining country. Buck remembered the name, Sparta, because it had been on the bank front, the first plate glass he had ever seen:

SPARTA BANK AND EXPRESS OFFICE
WEST-RINGO COMPANY
Express, Mail, Gold Shipments

Joe-dad hadn't stopped at Sparta. He had ridden on and camped in the hills. A dry camp. And that night he had made Buck stay in camp, and had ridden back alone. When, after midnight, he had ridden back, his bronc was lathered and bloody flanked, and Joe-dad had a bullet scrape across one cheek.

Buck hadn't needed orders to break camp and ride. Joe-dad's saddle-bags had new-minted money as well as banknotes, and Buck didn't need to read "West-Ringo" on one of the little money sacks to know where it had come from. It was whole hog or nothing now, all right.

SO WHEN Joe-dad had ridden across two states and thrown in with Wolf Sarpy and his gang, it was no surprise to Buck. Life, what Buck had seen of it, was all dog-eat-dog, anyway. What was the difference, after all, between cold-decking a drunken miner, like Gambler Ace Ferris, for instance, or robbing him and dumping him in the back alley, like what was done to "Whisky Mike." What was the difference between that and taking what you wanted by the gun from stage or train? No difference, except a hold-up took more nerve. Men who had that took from those who hadn't.

Wolf Sarpy had raised an objection to Buck at first, but Buck had fitted in handily. A youngster can ride in a town and buy grub, without too many questions asked. And he could hold horses as competently as a grown man.

Joe-dad got Buck the horse-holding job.

"His hide is too tender yet to shed bullets," Joe-dad had said. "And he ain't fast enough on the draw yet."

He didn't know, then, that Buck spent his whole spare time jerking the old Colt out of the leather, and blazing away at rocks and knots. He hadn't found out how fast Buck was until just before he had ridden away that last night—the night when he hadn't come back. Buck had stayed in camp that night with a stiff leg from a bronc kick.

The thoughts were still with him when the gang sat around the breakfast fire deep in the hills and divided the loot. Buck felt lonesome. It had been bad when Joe-dad went, but Ike Nard had sort of filled his place. Ike could even grin and drop a friendly word now and then. But the rest didn't know how to joke or even whistle.

Maybe this new puncher who said his name was "Red" might be a friendlier fellow. Because, after the votes of the Deacon and Big John, he had been accepted in Ike's place.

"Ike can't spend his share now," the Deacon allowed. "So I reckon it ought to go to Red here."

"I can't see where Red's got any right to any of this haul," Wolf Sarpy snapped greedily.

Red had waved the whole business aside. "Mebbe Wolf is right—anyway he's the ramrod. I can wait. West-Ringo has got plenty more shipments comin'."

There hadn't been so much to divide, anyway. Cherokee let up a howl about that.

"Eight-nine hunderd dollars—shucks, that ain't more'n two hunderd apiece. What about that Goldhill shipment that was supposed to be on that train?"

"It's all here—every red penny there was in the car!" growled Wolf Sarpy and glared at the gang. "Any you fellers think I been holdin' out on yuh?"

Red waved that away, too.

"Goldhill Mines ships every two weeks, and it shoulda been about ten thousand. That was why I picked Eighty-eight. But mebbe West-Ringo was late pickin' it up. Lots of things can happen."

"Then it was West-Ringo that held out on us," growled Cherokee. "We make 'em pay double, next time, huh? Cuss express companies, anyway! Nobody ain't got a right to be that rich."

"Plenty money in a West-Ringo jack-pot, if you hit her right," observed Red. "They ship for all the mines in this country."

"How come you know so much about West-Ringo business?" demanded the Deacon.

"Ought to," said Red. His eyes narrowed and his jaws went tight. "I used to work for 'em."

They slept four hours, saddled up, and rode on deeper and deeper into the tumbled hills. When they finally made permanent camp, Buck figured they were north and west of Sparta and almost in the edge of the rich mother lode diggings.

Red had slipped into Ike's old job as cook, and he was even friendlier than Buck had hoped. But that wasn't anything to Buck's feelings when Red dragged out an old harmonica one day down by the creek away from camp.

"Like music, huh?" Red had seen the glistening in Buck's eyes.

"Shore do," said Buck. "And these hombres don't even let yuh whistle!"

"Fellers get that way when they've been on the dodge too long," said Red. He looked at Buck keenly. "You ain't much more'n a button. You ain't got no business with this bunch. Why don't yuh hightail and get a job punchin' cows somewheres?"

"That's what Joe-dad always figgered for me to do, when we got a stake," said Buck. "We never got it. The Deacon wanted to gimme Joe-dad's share, that last hold-up Joe-dad made, but Wolf and Cherokee raked it all into the pot."

"Feller waits too long, he won't ever break away, I reckon," said Red. He was silent a minute. Then he said, "When we get a little stake together, what yuh say we up an' ride? I know an outfit up Montana way we can hook on with."

"I can't make no stake till I can share," said Buck. "And Wolf won't lemme in till I've killed my man."

RED looked startled.

"The devil yuh say! So that's the sort of lobo Sarpy is, huh?"

He couldn't say anything more, then, because Wolf woke up. He stretched and spoke to Red.

"Yuh say yuh was with West-Ringo. Would folks know yuh in Sparta if yuh was to ride in?"

Red shook his head. "Never was in Sparta. I was on the Sassfras run—a different branch."

"Good," said Wolf. "Yuh can ride into Sparta then and scout around—find out about the shipments. And bring back a copy of that Sparta newspaper that's called the *Nugget*. They'll have a story on the hold-up of Eighty-eight. We can learn somethin'. Sheriffs and them there editors are fools. They tell yuh everything. Take Buck along with yuh. A button can ask questions sometimes when a man can't."

Red nodded carelessly, and Buck's heart thumped. He was going to a town, to see miners, cowpunchers and saloons—everything!

CHAPTER III

Hornet's Nest

SEATED in the little office in front of the Sparta jail, Sheriff Pete Harker took off his spectacles, wiped them with his faded bandanna, put them back on, and squinted at the sunny street again.

"Nope," he remarked. "Reckon these old eyes of mine are playin' tricks again."

Deputy Bill Cotton shifted his boots on the spur-scared desk.

"Who yuh think yuh saw this time?" he grunted.

"Younker that just passed—'bout fourteen-fifteen—seemed to remind me of that button that rode through here with that puncher Joe, year or more ago, just before the West-Ringo bank and express office here was held up."

Deputy Cotton craned his neck to look up the street.

"The slim feller in the gray shirt that's talkin' to that red-headed cowboy that just come out of the Jackpot?"

"Talkin' with a redhead, huh?" Sheriff Harker shook his head. "Can't be the same button,

then. That feller Joe the button, I mean rode with wasn't a redhead. He was gray-whiskered as a badger."

"That's the trouble with you, Pete." The deputy scowled. "Wastin' yore time on past hist'ry when our jobs is teeterin' on the ragged edge 'cause of present doin's. Why, we don't even know that badger-whiskered puncher done that bank hold-up last year! If yuh don't begin payin' some attention to what people's sayin' yuh're goin' to be lookin' for a new job."

"What's people sayin'?" demanded the sheriff hurriedly.

The deputy snorted. "Generally they're sayin' a sheriff that has to use specs is too old to read sign on a outlaw trail. But more special they're sayin' Wolf Sarpy's got this county's law plumb bull-whacked. Almost a week since he held up Eighty-eight right in our faces, and we ain't turned up hair nor hide of 'im."

Sheriff Harker looked pained. "Don't see how they can blame us for that. They busted the engine so's it wouldn't run, and it was noon next day 'fore the conductor got here with the news. We tracked 'em to water, didn't we? Well, nobody can't foller no tracks in runnin' water."

"That ain't goin' to help win no election. Cuss it, Wolf Sarpy is howlin' too loud in these parts, an' we're goin' to lose our jobs if we don't make him sing small a whole lot. Why he's gettin' nigh as big a reputation as Jesse James."

"Huh? Jesse James?"

Suddenly Sheriff Pete Harker shoved back his chair, jammed his hat on his head and started for the door so fast he forgot to buckle on his gun which he had unbuckled and laid on the desk for comfort.

"Hey!" yelped the deputy. "Where you goin'?"

"To see a feller." Pete Harker chuckled as he faded through the door. "About Jesse James!"

But when Sheriff Harker walked into the office of the Sparta *Nugget* where the white-haired printer-editor was wedging home the last slugs of type in the old flat-bed press, he made no mention of the famous Missouri bandit.

"Hank Menafee," he said, scowling, "yuh're a disgrace to the community. Callin' the *Nugget* a newspaper!"

The editor let out a howl of indignation.

"Why, cuss yore hide, the *Nugget's* the best paper west of the Big Muddy. What's wrong with it?"

"No important news—and what you got ain't halfway right. What you got about the Sarpy gang?"

Angrily, Hank Menafee tossed him a still damp proof sheet. Putting on his spectacles, the lawman squinted at it, then handed it back with a grunt.

"Knew it! Wrong—yuh're way wrong on what the gang got off of Eighty-eight!"

"Yuh're loco! I got them figgers from Sam Weedon. He's Sparta manager of West-Ringo, and he ought to know. He's manager for this whole division!"

"Get yore type doodad ready, and I'll give yuh the facts," said Sheriff Harker.

Waiting until the puzzled printer had the type stick in one hand, and the other poised over the type cases, Harker nodded. "Now get this in just as tell yuh."

What he dictated read:

It has been learned from reliable sources that the loot obtained by the Sarpy gang in the recent train hold-up was greater even than first reported. There was an additional ten thousand dollars in bullion bars, the clean-up of the Goldhill Mining Company. It is also feared that the Big Kettle Company lost a five-thousand-dollar shipment in the same express car.

HANK MENAFEE whirled, his eyes snapping.

"That's a lie! The Goldhill clean-up didn't make the train!"

"Hank," snarled the sheriff, "you print what I say or I'll jail yuh for obstructin' justice! I ain't finished yet."

He dictated some more:

In consequence of the hold-up, the weekly clean-ups of the mines in this vicinity will be held in the Sparta office of the West-Ringo Company and sent out once a month hereafter under extra heavy guard.

Sheriff Harker tilted his hat-brim forward. Now get ready for some more right alongside that—and here's the headin', too."

OUTLAW CAPTURE EXPECTED SOON

Pinkerton railroad detectives are tight-mouthed, but they are wearing expectant looks. It is understood they are in communication with one of the Sarpy gang who feels he was cheated of his fair share in the express car robbery, and who has offered to turn in the outlaw gang in return for immunity and the reward on Sarpy's head. It is expected that the outlaw's offer will be accepted just as soon as the Governor can wire the guarantee of immunity.

"Now pull a proof of that and lemme see have yuh got it right," said the lawman, and the swearing editor obeyed.

Scanning the wet inked proofs, Sheriff Harker nodded.

"Now get a hustle on and run off lots of extra copies, and scatter 'em all over the county," he ordered. "Don't forget plenty for the hotel and saloons. If that ain't done in an hour I'll be back to see yuh!"

"Extry copies!" yelped the editor. "Who's goin' to pay for all them extry copies?"

"Shucks, ain't yuh got no public spirit a-tall? Send yore bill to the town or the county or the governor, I don't care which!"

Chuckling, the sheriff sauntered into the sunlight, and jingled his way back toward the jail.

With his reading glasses still on, he didn't see the man approaching until he bumped into him. It was the red-headed cowpuncher. The puncher gave a startled gasp as his glance took in the sheriff's badge, turned and vanished through the door of the nearby general store.

Sheriff Pete Harker stood there blinking. Then with an oath he also plunged into the store. But there was no one in sight but the storekeeper, and the only sound was the thud of a horse's hoofs pounding away out back.

Sheriff Harker made a record getting back to the jail.

"Bill Cotton!" he was calling out to his deputy as he burst in. "That red-headed jigger just hightailed it from back of the general store! Fork yore bronc and take after him. Fetch him back—I want to talk to him. But don't shoot him. I want him alive, extra special!"

Deputy Bill Cotton grabbed up his Winchester and started for the door.

"Who is the redhead? What's he done?"

"Less I'm mistook, he's that stage-driver West-Ringo had arrested for startin' out with a gold shipment and endin' up with a box of bricks on that Goldhill-Sassfras run, a year back. I only seen him once, over to Sassfras—but I'd swear to that carrot-top."

"The one that busted out of Sassfras calaboose whilst he was 'waitin' trial? The devil yuh say!" Deputy Cotton was gone.

Half an hour later, scowling and dejected, he came back.

"Musta ducked off up one of them hill canyons," he grumbled. "Didn't sight hide nor hair of him."

Sheriff Harker frowned, but brightened up again as he turned back to his proof-sheets.

"Like yuh said, though, that's past hist'ry, and nowise important compared to present. What yuh think of these?"

Cotton read the smudged proof-sheets rapidly.

"What I think of them? I think they're lies—downright lies! What sorta newspaper does Hank Menafee think he's puttin' out?"

"You ain't read 'em careful," said the sheriff. "Read 'em again."

This time as Deputy Cotton read, amazement began to show on his face. He swore admiringly.

"Yore eyes may need specs, but yore brain shore as shootin' don't." Then he gave an even more startled exclamation. "Hey! Yuh're goin' to get men killed account of this!"

"That's what I figgered." Sheriff Harker closed one eye craftily. "Now what we got to do is try to see it's the right men that gets killed. . . ."

SOME distance out of town, Buck was riding along the winding canyon trail that led back into the hills when Red rode out of a clump of dense scrub oak to meet him.

"Had to cut an' run," Red explained. "Run into a feller that looked like he knew me. You get that newspaper?"

Buck waved a crumpled sheet triumphantly. "Sneaked it right outa the Jackpot Saloon."

"Good. Let's ride. Wolf'll be waitin'."

Red touched spurs to the long-barreled horse.

Just before sundown they reached the little hidden clearing where stood the abandoned trapper's cabin that was Wolf Sarpy's hole-up. The outlaw leader was waiting impatiently. Cherokee and Big John and the Deacon came running at sound of the horses' hoofs.

"Any news?" Wolf demanded, as Red swung from the saddle.

"Plenty." Red nodded. "Clean-ups are runnin' good. Reckon the veins are gettin' richer. An' it's all pourin' into the West-Ringo office for shipment. All we got to do is pick it up."

"What's the paper got about the express car hold-up?" The Deacon grabbed the paper from Buck's hand. "Here she is, on the front page."

He read rapidly, then swung on Wolf Sarpy with his eyes flaming.

"So that's the sort of cheatin' ramrod you are, huh? Hold out on yore own pardners! I knew that express haul ought to been bigger'n it was!"

[*Turn page*]

Wolf Sarpy scowled. "What yuh mean?"

"You know plumb well what I mean! Where's the rest of that stuff? Where's that Goldhill ten thousand the paper says was took out of the car? Where's that Big Kettle five thousand?"

The Deacon's fingers quivered over the butt of his holstered gun.

"There wasn't no ten thousand! I divided all there was! Gimme that paper!" The outlaw leader grabbed up the paper, peered at it through frowning eyes.

But when he flung the paper away, it was not at the Deacon alone that his rage burst out, but at the whole lot of them, his suspicious eyes ranging hawklike over each one.

"Where is he?" he roared. "Where is the belly-crawlin' snake that's goin' to turn me in?"

Cherokee looked at him suspiciously.

"Who?"

"Somebody that figgers to shoot a pardner in the back, just like Bob Ford shot Jesse James!" snarled Wolf Sarpy. "Deacon, you was the first one squawkin' about not gettin' yore share! By thunder, if it was you—"

"The Deacon, huh?" Cherokee's eyes glittered. He snatched at his holster. "Nobody's goin' to shoot me in the back! Nobody's goin' to turn me in to hang!"

But the Deacon was like a king snake after a rattler. His left hand slapped out, knocking the half-breed's gun-hand back and down. At the same time his Colt .45 was shoved deep into Cherokee's ribs.

"I don't have to shoot yuh in the back!" he yelped. "All I gotta do is let go the hammer and blow yore liver through yore backbone. Half-blood always was bad blood. If anybody's turnin' us in I bet it's you, yuh cussed breed!"

But already Wolf Sarpy's suspicious eyes had switched to the red-haired puncher. His fingers jerked his gun half out of leather.

"It's only yore say-so that yuh're outlaw!" he said, and swore mightily. "You might be a Pinkerton man yoreself—an' I aim to find out!"

"You lift that iron a inch further and yuh'll find out plenty!" snapped the redhead, his voice like brittle ice.

And to Buck's amazement, though he had not even seen the puncher's hand move, it clutched the butt of a six-gun that was two inches further out of holster than Sarpy's.

"If I was a Pinkerton man, I'd a-dropped yuh in yore tracks that night in the car when I had a clean drop on yuh. I ain't a Pinkerton man, and I aim to collect a stake from West-Ringo if it's the last thing I do!"

"Buck!" yelled Sarpy. "Bust a hole through his red head! Shoot!"

It was the first time Buck realized that he had his own gun out of the holster and leveled. But surprisingly it was leveled at Wolf Sarpy, too. Red suddenly laughed.

"Buck's holdin' the ace, all right. But don't count too much on his playin' it yore way, Sarpy. Seein' as how it looks like a stand-off, I'm suggestin' that everybody shove his own iron back in his own leather, and be reasonable."

CHAPTER IV

A Hold-up Fails

WITH hesitating fingers and suspicious eyes, slowly the outlaws holstered their guns.

Red nodded. "That's better. And listen here, Wolf. I got just as much grudge against West-Ringo as you have. More. They'd had me in the pen right now if I hadn't busted out, an' I shore aim to make 'em pay. I'm votin' we hit that Sparta office tomorrow for all they got!"

Cherokee's smoky eyes glinted greedily, and the Deacon nodded. Big John was silent, and finally Wolf Sarpy nodded.

"All right. But I ain't turnin' my back on nobody here. An' when we get that job finished I'm takin' up this business again till I'm satisfied."

"Suits me," said Red. "When we get this Sparta job finished an' I get my stake, I'm ridin'. Meantime anybody that hints I'm a spy better say it with gunsmoke." Red jerked his head at Buck. "Come on, feller."

"Where yuh goin'?" demanded Sarpy.

"Spreadin' our blankets outside—and I ain't sayin' where. I got just as much respect for my back as you got for yore's, Sarpy. . . ."

The outlaw band—a silent crew—rode for Sparta the next day.

Just short of the last hump before the narrow winding canyon trail opened onto the town, Wolf Sarpy stopped.

"Nigh noon of a week-day, and nobody much about, except townfolks," he said with satisfaction. "They'll be likely to hunt their holes the minute we begin shootin'. Ride in one at a time. Every man ties his hoss to the hitch-rack back of the saloon, then gets to his right place. Savvy?"

There were nods, and the outlaw leader continued.

"Cherokee watches the front of the jail and drops the John Laws if they come bustin' out. The Deacon does likewise with the Jackpot Saloon. Red watches up the street to stop anybody comin' out of the houses. Buck holds the hosses, ready for us to ride. Me and Big John does the job in the bank. Clean away 'fore folks wake up."

One by one they rode off. Buck's throat was dry and prickles were crawling up and down his back. But he felt better when the red-headed cowboy gave him a grin and a wink as he followed the Deacon. When Buck, following

the others, rode into sight of Sparta, the little town looked asleep under the sun. Before he rode to the hitch-rack back of the saloon he caught a brief glimpse of Red leaning against a post, rolling a quirly, and of Big John loafing just outside the store. The others were nowhere in sight.

Dismounting, he untied the reins of the other horses at the hitch-rack, looped them all over an arm and climbed back into the saddle. As he did, he saw Wolf Sarpy go into the bank. Big John left the store front and turned toward the bank, chewing a cracker.

Sitting his saddle, Buck could look right through the plate glass front of the West-Ringo bank and express office. He could see the stoop-shouldered cashier, the fat manager smoking a cigar at the desk behind the low rail of the inner office. He could even see the big safe.

Wolf Sarpy had stopped in front of the cashier's window, was fumbling with his wallet. But as Big John came in, Wolf put away the wallet, suddenly jerked out his six-gun, and shoved it in the cashier's face.

Buck couldn't hear the cashier's startled cry, but he could see his hands go up over his head. Big John had covered the West-Ringo manager, whose fat arms and hands went up.

A little twitch of scorn came to Buck's lips. They hadn't even made a move to protect their money. Men that chicken-hearted didn't deserve to have money.

Big John was forcing the cashier to rake gold coins and banknotes into the gunny-sack Big John had pulled out from under his shirt. At the wave of Wolf's gun, the manager stumbled toward the safe and began to turn the combination knobs. The heavy door swung open, and Wolf stooped slightly to look inside.

Suddenly the manager made a grab for Wolf's gun.

"Hold-up!" he yelled. "Help! Hold-up!"

Wolf jerked around, his heavy Frontier model Colt lifted in air. Buck knew Joe-dad would simply have dropped that heavy Colt barrel on top of the manager's head, but at what Wolf did Buck's heart cramped within him. Sarpy's gun barrel dropped, then the whole muzzle blurred out a jet of flame and smoke. The manager's head became a scarlet horror and he dropped like a blasted log.

A woman coming out of the store with packages had stopped. She dropped her packages, pointing toward the bank and screaming. The storekeeper poked his head out of the door, stared, popped back inside again. Everywhere then voices began to shout.

For Scarpy was running out of the bank now, smoking gun still in hand. Behind him came Big John, the half-filled sack dangling from his hand. Evidently they had grabbed what had been in the cashier's cage, abandoning the safe.

Suddenly the whole sleepy street was awake. The storekeeper shoved a shotgun around the door-jamb, fired it without aim. From the door of the jail came the crack of a heavy Colt, answered immediately by Cherokee's crashing answer. The Deacon's loud curse and Red's yell joined the uproar, aided by their rattling six-guns as they sprayed the street.

Slamming the spurs home, Buck raced out into the street, jerking the saddled horses after him. The outlaws came up at a run, grabbed their horses' reins from Buck and swung aboard, cursing. As they swept the street Wolf Sarpy was in the lead, with Cherokee racing almost at his side. Buck followed, with Red riding at one stirrup, the Deacon at the other.

"Bloodthirsty wolf!" the Deacon was snarl-

"You've Brought Me Here to Kill Me!"

THERE WAS UTTER PANIC in Peter Lamner's voice as he looked at the young avenger, Tom Keith, who had made him ride far out into the hills—at gun's point.

"RIDE ON!" commanded Keith. "I'm no thief—or killer. But I've something plumb interestin' to tell you!"

YOU'LL BE STARTLED—as Peter Lamner was—when you find out about Tom Keith's amazing plan for revenge in TRAIL TO YESTERDAY, Johnston McCulley's exciting complete action novelet packed with thrills!

COMING IN THE NEXT ISSUE

ing. "Didn't hafta kill that banker! Now the whole hive's buzzin'. . . Where's Big John?"

Buck turned to look, and gasped.

Maybe it was the gunny-sack banging against its withers as Big John tried to tie it to the saddle-horn, maybe it was the gunflame and acrid smoke, but Big John's roan bronc was jerking and plunging, and Big John was still afoot, trying to get within stirrup reach.

His slow mind could not handle both problems at once. Even as he wrapped the reins around his powerful wrist, a rifle cracked from the direction of the jail. Big John sank to one knee, dropped the sack, and began firing.

"The fool!" the Deacon yelled. "If he don't get aboard that hoss, they'll finish him!"

Red's voice suddenly crackled out, crisp and sharp. "Buck, you get out of here! This ain't no business for you."

Wolf Sarpy's belief that the townsfolk who would hunt their holes at the first gunfire, was all wrong. They were like angry hornets. Windows and doors all along the street were spurting smoke and flame. Bullets were screaming and humming all around the fleeing men.

Big John was down on both knees now, but hanging onto the reins of the dancing horse like grim death. The rifle cracked again, and Big John sprawled flat.

"Finished!" Red's voice was harsh. "No use waitin'!"

The Deacon suddenly swore. "That money sack—she's right out there in the middle of the street!" He sank his spurs and drove back through the bullet hail, bending low in his saddle, his arm outstretched.

But even as he almost touched the crumpled sack, the Deacon's horse went down. Dumped head over heels, the Deacon went rolling against Big John's riddled body.

When the Deacon tried to scramble up again, one of his legs dragged woodenly. With one glance toward his dead horse, he started dragging himself on hands and knees toward Big John's dead hand that held fast the knotted reins of the twisting, lunging roan.

"Buck! Buck!" Red shouted hoarsely. "Come back here!"

Buck himself couldn't have reasoned it. But all at once he was whirling his mount, racing back toward Big John and the Deacon. His gun was lifted, the hammer thumbed back, and his eyes were flashing.

HE SAW a white-haired man shove a shotgun barrel through a pane of the front window of the print shop. Buck's bullet broke the pane above it, brought the glass spattering down about the white-haired printer. The shotgun spat its buckshot high in air, and the printer ducked out of sight, cursing.

Then out of the alley between the jail and the general store, a long-legged, horse-faced man came loping out into the dusty street. He was running toward the Deacon, when the thud of hoofs whirled him about. Buck saw the glinting law badge, and the six-shooter that was jerked up, to flash and flash again. The deputy's first bullet whined past Buck's ear, the second sent his hat spinning.

Then Buck whipped down his own Colt barrel. But he never pulled the trigger. He saw the deputy's face go white, saw the deputy's finger vainly jerk the trigger over empty chambers.

Buck swerved his horse with reins and knee. There was a yell, a thud. The deputy's empty gun went spinning in one direction, the deputy in the other. And when Deputy Bill Cotton stopped rolling, he scuttled on hands and knees under the board sidewalk, like a scared gopher.

Buck was already jerking his mount to its haunches beside the Deacon. Looping the reins over his wrist, he was down, was tugging at the Deacon, trying to haul him upright.

But though he got the Deacon up on his one sound leg, the two horses were snorting and dancing too much for him to hoist the outlaw into either saddle.

It was at that moment that with a rush and a clatter, and a cloud of dust, another rider arrived. Red's big hands were shoving reins into Buck's hands. "Hold yore hoss and mine!" he boomed. "I'll hoist 'im aboard!"

It was the swirling dust, perhaps, that shut them from sight of the keen-eyed riflemen for those precious seconds. Red's brawny arms shoved the Deacon into the saddle of Big John's roan, then Red was swinging back into his own saddle, yelling at Buck:

"Get! Get the Deacon out of here! I'll ride behind and cover yuh!"

And as Buck and the Deacon pounded up the street, over his shoulders, Buck saw Red racing behind them, firing first to one side of the street, then the other. Buck, too, emptied his Colt chambers warningly at windows and doorways as they fled.

CHAPTER V

The Long Trail

THE three riders were more than a mile out of town, and around the first bend of the narrow, rocky canyon before they dared slow up.

"How yuh makin' it, old-timer?" Red asked the Deacon. "Kinda tough ridin' with a busted leg?"

"Yeah." The Deacon's voice seemed heavy, almost as if he had roused out of sleep to answer. "But I can ride, an' we can't stop to fix it now."

He stared at Buck. "And you come back for me." There was a note of wonder in his voice. "None of the others woulda done it!"

"Red would—he come back and boosted yuh," declared Buck.

But as they rode on up the winding trail, time and again the Deacon mumbled:

"The button—he come back for me!"

The Deacon's broken leg must have been agonizing under the horse's jolting, for Buck could see the twinges of pain jerking at the outlaw's lips, could see his hands tighten spasmodically on the saddle-horn. Then the outlaw spoke to Red.

"I got my two hunderd from that express hold-up at that hideout shack. I'm givin' it to Buck here, and I want you to see he gets it."

"Yuh're goin' to need all that, and more, for the doctor and all," said Red tersely. "Broken legs cost money."

"You heard me—and I don't want yuh to forget." Despite his pain, the Deacon increased his roan's gait. "We don't want to get there too long after Wolf and that breed. I ain't trustin' them two hombres none."

An hour later they came suddenly out of the brushy screen into the little clearing where the cabin sat.

"Didn't I tell yuh?" the Deacon spat. "They're already gettin' ready to leave."

In front of the cabin, beside the saddled horses, stood the two pack-horses, packs bulging with pots, pans, and sacks, over which Cherokee was just throwing the last hitch.

"Up to yore old tricks, huh?" the Deacon growled. "Wasn't waitin' none on us, huh?"

Wolf Sarpy shot him a black scowl. "We was just gettin' everything ready to light out soon as yuh come. They'll have a posse after us in no time."

"Yuh're a liar, Wolf. And I bet yuh got my money and Big John's in them packs right now." The Deacon's eyes were narrowed slits. "Well, this is one time yuh don't run out on a pardner that's got winged. I got a bad busted leg, but I ain't no hoss with a busted leg, to finish off with a bullet—like yuh done them others!"

Sarpy's fingers dropped toward his gun.

"What yuh mean?"

"I mean yuh ain't shootin' me to keep me from slowin' yuh up—like yuh done Ike Nard and Joe!"

Ike Nard and Joe? Buck's brain suddenly reeled with the import of it.

"Joe-dad? You shot Joe-dad?"

Anger like a red wave surged over him, his blood boiled, and his hand whipped downward. "Yuh killed Joe-dad—yuh murdered Joe-dad!" Buck's voice rose shrilly. "Why, yuh murderin' lobo!"

Startled, Wolf Sarpy made a frantic grab for his own weapon. Cherokee cursed, and whirled. Red was yelling, was twisting in his own saddle. Then the whole world rocked with the blasting explosions.

But to Buck's surprise, even though Wolf Sarpy's hate-twisted face was directly at his gun muzzle, so large and close that he couldn't miss, something at the last moment seemed to jerk his gunhand sideward. The Colt bucked in Buck's hand, but instead of shattering Sarpy's skull it shattered his shoulder instead.

The gun dropped from Sarpy's limp fingers. His mouth popped wide open in surprise and pain. Cherokee was down, rolling and clutching at his stomach. Then with a curse, Wolf Sarpy leaped for his gun.

LIKE a dynamite blast, something went off at Buck's very ear. Sarpy's left leg buckled, and he fell, his voice rising in a throaty scream. The Deacon lowered his smoking gun, and his voice was thin and brittle.

"Yuh was always so keen on treatin' pardners like broken-legged hosses, Wolf—see how yuh like a busted leg yoreself!"

Then he turned to Buck whose soul was still sick with shock.

"Help me off, Buck."

Somehow Buck managed to help the Deacon down. Red had dismounted, had picked up Sarpy's unfired gun, and was bending over the half-breed. Cherokee's open eyes were staring, unseeing, up at the sky.

"Just beat him to it. He was quick." Red straightened, and dazedly felt the red bullet scrape across his cheek. Then he turned quickly toward the pack-horses.

"Got to get started. That posse ain't goin' to wait forever. Buck, gimme a hand here!"

Quickly they knotted the lead ropes together and then to Red's saddle-horn. Between his curses and groans, Wolf Sarpy watched with glaring eyes.

"Yuh ain't goin' to leave me lyin' here?" he gasped. "That posse'll find me!"

Red's voice was icy cold. "We're leavin' one hoss here. If yuh can mount and ride, that's yore own lookout. If yuh can't—well, that's still more of a chance that yuh've given better men. Buck, help the Deacon back on his bronc."

But when Buck bent over the Deacon, that old outlaw shook his head and his lips twisted oddly.

"Just gimme the rifle out of that roan's saddle-boot, then lay my belt where I can get at the cartridges handy. I'm stayin' right here with Wolf."

"But that posse'll be here!" Buck said dazedly.

"Won't make no difference—much—to me. Didn't tell yuh, but I picked up a bullet in town that had my name on it." When the Deacon's vest flapped open, for the first time Buck saw the blotch of crimson on the outlaw's shirt. "I been bleedin' inside. But I ain't forgettin' what yuh done for me. Gimme my rifle. I can hold that posse till sundown. That ought to give yuh plenty start."

Red scowled. "Yuh're comin' with us. If yuh're that bad hit, yuh couldn't shoot straight, noway."

"Straight enough to drop hosses," retorted the Deacon irritably. "Ain't figgerin' on killin' no men, nohow. I'll be shakin' hands with Saint

Peter, come sundown, and I don't want no more blood on 'em than they got already. Gimme my rifle, cuss yuh, then ride! Yuh're wastin' my time!"

To Buck's amazement Red pulled the Winchester from the bronc's saddle, and put it and the cartridge belt into the outlaw's hands. Then he jerked his head toward the trail.

"Get started, Buck. I'll be right along."

Buck climbed aboard his saddle, and with a lump in his throat turned up the trail. Soon Red joined him, with the pack-horses.

"Yuh left him?" Buck's voice was husky. "It don't seem right."

"He's easier, lyin' there, than he would be dyin' in the saddle," Red said soberly. "The Deacon's got lots to square hisself for, I reckon, and if it's any satisfaction to him to think he's helpin' us get away, I ain't robbin' him of it. But I been robbin' you, mebbe."

"Robbin' me?"

"Yeah. 'Cause I left that express haul back there with them, includin' the two hunderd the Deacon wanted you to have."

Buck shivered. "I don't want it. I wouldn't touch it."

"That's what I was hopin' to hear yuh say." Red's voice brightened with relief. "When I got jailed for missin' gold that another man changed for bricks—that sneakin' manager, Weedon, I figger—I thought stealin' it back from West-Ringo would be gettin' even. But I've changed my mind a whole lot. That Montana job's still waitin', an' I reckon they got room for both me and you, pardner."

Pardner! Buck's heart began to lift. Why, having a pardner was almost like having folks!

As the trail climbed higher, Buck strained his ears. But the stillness was not broken by any distant shots. When they came out on the bare ridge of a crest, they stopped.

As far as they could see, the ridges were purple and green. The canyons were deep purple, fading into black. But over the farthest ridge hung the red-gold sun, its parting rays painting the skies with crimson hope. It was just sunset.

In unison they turned to look back.

"So long, Deacon," murmured Buck.

"So long, old-timer," said Red.

Once more they set their horses' heads to the trail—the long trail to Montana.

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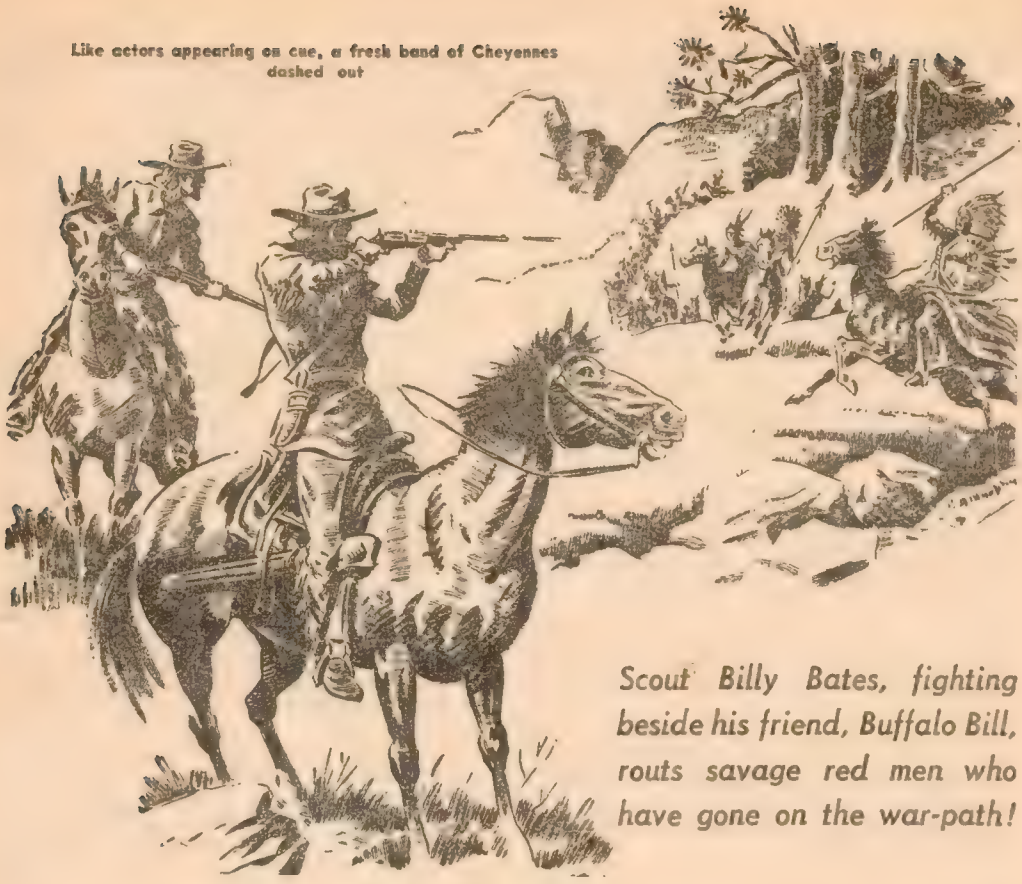


Like actors appearing on cue, a fresh band of Cheyennes dashed out

Scout Billy Bates, fighting beside his friend, Buffalo Bill, routs savage red men who have gone on the war-path!

A Scalp for Custer

By SCOTT CARLETON

THE snow was out of the deep passes of the Rockies by mid-June, but "Buffalo Billy" Bates, leisurely packing his winter's fur catch, did not descend to the plains until the end of the month. Off duty, the famous scout had enjoyed an infrequent winter's peace, trapping in the Big Horn.

He rode a deep-chested bay and led an Army mule packed with his furs. The animals showed new life as they struck the rich green grass of the plains and even Billy Bates' eyes lit up. Though spring had barely come to the mountains, here summer had spread its glory of grass and leaf and flower. Throwing back his magnificent, buckskin-clad shoulders, Billy Bates drew deep, slow breaths of the perfumed air.

He made his first night's camp on the South Fork of the Powder River. Though the Indians had hung up the tomahawk, it was not in his nature to take foolish chances. His cooking fire was not lighted until after dark, so the smoke could not be seen, and it was out as soon as his essential cooking was done. Then he moved his camp a mile farther on, hobbled the mule, but let his horse graze free, and spread his bed in the shadow of a clump of willows.

He awoke at dawn, all his senses suddenly tight with alarm. He opened his eyes and in the murky gray light saw an Indian standing four feet away, holding Billy's own rifle pointed at him.

Billy Bates did not move. In that second of

time that stretched out into an eternity, he noted that the Indian was a Sioux and, what was more significant, he was decked out in full war paint. The worst possible sign! It meant that serious mischief was afoot.

Buffalo Billy wasted no recriminations for having been caught asleep. No white man, no matter how skilful, would ever successfully master the magical woodcraft of the Indian. "How," Billy Bates said softly. "My brother, what bad medicine is this? Have not the Sioux made peace talk with the Great White Father?"

There was about the Indian an aura of fierce excitement, of triumph so great it could hardly be contained under his controlled exterior.

"I know you," he said softly in Sioux. "You are Pa-he-has-ka, Long Hair. Your scalp will look well on my lodge beside that of Yellow Hair!"

He pointed to the fresh and bloody scalp hanging on his belt, a scalp with long blond hair bedimmed by dust and blood.

A sudden fierce shock of alarm drove the blood from Billy Bates' heart.

"I know only one man who is called Yellow Hair," he said. "General Custer! He is a mighty warrior and his soldiers are as many as the blades of grass on the prairie. You make a poor lie, my brother."

The Indian's eyes gleamed with feral light.

"Ask the feasting ravens and buzzards on the Little Big Horn if Wild Horse lies. Ask the long knife of Yellow Hair!"

His left hand swept down and something clanked at his side.

BILLY BATES saw a cavalry saber strapped incongruously to the Indian's side. It was a beautifully finished weapon with ornamentation, and could only have belonged to a high officer.

Even as conviction came to him that some dark deed had in truth been accomplished, he saw decision in Wild Horse's eyes. The Sioux's finger closed down on the trigger of Billy's gun.

In the same breathless instant, the scout acted. A long leg flew up under his blanket. Rising in the air like a tent, it startled Wild Horse, but underneath it, Billy's moccasined foot caught the rifle muzzle and sent it into the air just as it belched flame and smoke.

He was blinded, deafened by the stunning explosion right in his face. But the bullet passed overhead and though he could scarcely see or hear, instinct drove him to his feet and flung him at the Indian.

Wild Horse dropped the rifle and snatched his sheath knife just as Billy Bates' plunging body struck him. Desperately the scout snatched at the Indian's wrist. Then they were locked in fierce swaying battle, striving for possession of the knife.

The Indian was powerful, and for the first few moments of the struggle he had the advantage. Bates had been all but stunned by the explosion in his face. Wildly he strove to force the knife blade closer to the buckskin-clad chest of the white man.

They fought in silence, except for the rush of breath and the quick scuff of feet. And while they strove with death, the morning breeze lifted softly over the grasslands and the first sweet chorus of birds made innocent accompaniment to the harsh gasps of the battle.

Billy's head began to clear; the ringing in his ears subsided. With it, his superb control came into play. He forced the Indian back, applied a twist to his arm that got the knife point away from his chest and began to bend the Sioux's arm back.

Wild Horse threw every ounce of his splendid strength into an effort to tear loose. When it failed he opened his mouth and made the first sound of the fight. He gave the sharp yelp of a coyote.

Billy had thought the Indian would be too proud to call for help, although he had anticipated the possibility of other red men being near. But Wild Horse was too crafty to let pride stand in his way.

Billy heard the quick scuff of moccasins from the willows. To delay a moment would be to invite a knife in his back. He let go of the Indian's wrist.

Even as savage triumph flashed in Wild Horse's eyes and his blade leaped to finish the job, he ran into the one white man's trick the Indian could never understand. Billy Bates' fist darted forward only six inches. But Wild Horse was coming toward it. There was a sharp smack and the Indian was hurtled backward and went rolling end over end in the grass. The knife flew from his fingers.

Billy dived for his rifle. A tomahawk hurtled over his head and struck with a bone-chilling thump in a willow trunk. Swiftly, Billy was levering a new shell into the barrel of the gun as he squirmed around on the ground to face the new foe.

A Sioux who had burst from the willows was charging him. As he saw his tomahawk miss, the Indian stopped and swung up his own rifle. Both guns blasted together.

The grass leaped violently near Billy's face and a little jet of earth stung his skin. The Sioux dropped his rifle and plunged forward, dead before he struck the ground. Billy came to his knees, swung back to face Wild Horse. The Indian was gone. Wild Horse had decided to call the fight off.

Billy came to his feet. Cautiously but swiftly, he darted through the screen of trees, broke through into the open prairie beyond. Wild Horse, mounted on a shaggy mustang, was galloping down upon Billy Bates' own horse. But the wily animal swerved and plunged away. Wild Horse brought up his rifle, squeezed off a quick shot at the horse, that missed.

The next instant, Billy's bullet screamed close past the Indian's head and the Sioux ducked to the far side of his mount where he remained hidden until they passed from sight over a rise.

Billy Bates whistled his horse in and saddled up. Something dreadful must have happened. There was no other interpretation he could put on Wild Horse's words, "Feasting ravens on the Little Big Horn." It sounded like a massacre! And that long-haired blond scalp at the Indian's belt!

"Got to get to Laramie on the double-quick!" he muttered.

Bill Cody should be there, and some troops of the Fifth Cavalry. Perhaps news had come over the telegraph wires.

He mounted and went to look for his mule. He didn't have to go far. The animal was lying a little way from the camp in a pool of blood, it's throat cut. The furs were scattered and hacked with knives until they were valueless.

Billy looked down at the ruins of a whole winter's work. But he was lucky his own throat hadn't been cut in his sleep. Well, without the mule he would get to Fort Laramie that much faster.

IT IS only a hundred and thirty-eight miles from South Fork to Fort Laramie, but the shortest way meant crossing the North Platte twice plus half a dozen of its tributaries. So it was evening of the second day of hard travel before Billy sighted the fort and heard the clear notes of "retreat" rising into the stillness of the sunset.

He had pounded almost to the gates of the fort when he saw a horseman riding to intercept him. He recognized the flowing hair, the handsome light mustache and goatee of the man who had been a father to him—"Buffalo Bill" Cody.

They came together with a rush and their handclasp carried all the things they felt and could not say to one another. Bill Cody's teeth flashed in his handsome face.

"Billy boy, it's good to see you! I was just asking Providence to send you!"

"Somethin's up," Billy Bates said. "I nearly killed a horse gettin' here after meetin' a Sioux Indian in warpaint on the Powder. Has anything happened to Custer?"

Bill Cody's eyes fell. He swallowed as though there was a lump in his throat.

"We got word yesterday. Custer and five companies wiped out by Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse on the Little Big Horn."

The Little Big Horn! So Wild Horse had spoken the truth when he said the ravens and buzzards were flocking to the feast on the Little Big Horn.

For a while they could not speak, but turned their horses and moved together toward the fort.

"We need you now, Billy boy," Bill Cody said then. "General Merritt is here with eight companies of the Fifth Cavalry. We're on our way to reinforce Crook north of the Big Horn. This time we'll get Sitting Bull."

"I'm with you," Bates said slowly. "I've got a little job of my own to do."

"What's that?"

"I told you I met an Indian named Wild Horse. He had Custer's scalp."

"What?" Cody was jolted out of his normal calm.

"Yes, I believe it now. But I'm going to get that Sioux for Custer. That's about all I can do for the general, but that'll be one scalp for Custer!"

* * * * *

The officers of General Merritt's staff had assembled in the headquarters tent. An aide-de-camp tapped for attention and the men sprang up as Merritt entered.

"At ease, gentlemen," he said brusquely.

His eyes took them all in, from the spruce, unblooded West Pointers, trim in their blue uniforms, to the grizzled veterans of many an Indian war, and the buckskin-clad scouts with their wide beaver hats.

"Gentlemen," he said, "Major Stanton, just returned from his reconnaissance mission to Red Cloud, brings word that eight hundred Cheyenne warriors have left the reservation to join Sitting Bull."

"The black-bearded scoundrels!" Captain King said excitedly. "Couldn't resist a chance for scalps and loot! It isn't even their fight!"

Merritt smiled grimly.

"Their fight or not, the Cheyennes are throwing in their lot with the Sioux. What began as a punitive expedition against a few bucks out for a bit of horse stealing and a scalp or two, has turned into a major Indian uprising. The loss of Custer and five companies is a stunning defeat for the United States Army! It should convince you that when Sitting Bull tells the braves to take down the tomahawks he means business!

"Now, gentlemen, our orders are to ride by way of Fetterman and join General Crook north of the Big Horn for a push against the Sioux. However, if we let these eight hundred Cheyenne braves slip by us to join Sitting Bull, I should consider it a grave dereliction of our duty. I have decided, therefore, that our first business is to cut off and drive back or annihilate this force."

The men broke out in short, fierce cheers. Merritt held up his hand.

"In order to intercept them without raising suspicion, we shall have to ride around three sides of a square while they ride up the fourth. They may not hurry, for they do not know we have knowledge of their movements. We must ride hard. Our supply wagons will have to follow as fast as they can."

The general's eyes sought out Cody and Bates.

"The most difficult job, as usual," he said, "goes to Scouts Cody and Bates. Upon them

falls the responsibility of seeing that we do not ride into ambush and that the Indians do not learn of our presence."

By sunset, of the next day seven companies of the Fifth Cavalry were riding down into the valley of the Niobrara. Camp was made at Running Water. Shortly before midnight, the supply wagons came up, Lieutenant Hall grinning triumphantly at his success in keeping up.

At three o'clock the men were aroused and climbed out, grumbling as soldiers do, in the starlight. Coffee and bacon was served, the horses fed, and by five the troop was in saddle and away.

It was fifty miles more in their roundabout way, to the crossing on the War Bonnet, the stream which unimaginative white men called Hat Creek. For the Cheyennes it was only twenty-eight.

BY EIGHT that night, with the pale stars once more agleam, the Fifth slid as quietly as possible, into the timber of the War Bonnet.

The tired troopers could rest now, but the work of Cody and Bates was just begun. Separating, the two scouts made a wide sweep about camp and came back to report no signs of Indians.

There was time for a few hours of sleep, so Billy Bates and Cody turned in. They were up again before the stars had paled in the east.

With a detachment commanded by Captain King, they scouted to the southeast, the direction from which the Cheyennes were expected to come. The regular troops took positions along the stream, commanding the crossing of the Indian road, but the two scouts filtered ahead through meadowland and timber.

A high ridge crossed the southern sky, sweeping in a rough semi-circle about their positions. Billy and Cody left their horses and crawled to the top of this vantage point where they established themselves comfortably, with the field-glasses.

To the northeast, twenty miles away, the southern ramparts of the Black Hills in Dakota loomed dark and menacing against the glowing sky. Rosy color stole swiftly into the east. The stars blinked out and cottonwood leaves sighed in the morning breeze.

"Death and destruction seem a long way off, don't they, Billy boy?" Cody murmured.

"Not to me," Billy Bates said through clenched teeth. "Not when I meet up with Wild Horse again."

"What makes you think he'll be *here?*"

Billy rolled over on his side and chewed a blade of grass.

"He was headin' southeast," he explained. "Comin' from the Big Horn country. Stands to reason if he left Sittin' Bull at a time like this it was for a mighty good reason. I think he came down here to Red Cloud to talk these Cheyennes into goin' on the warpath."

"Possible," Cody agreed. "Then you think he might be ridin' north with these Cheyennes now?"

"That's just what I'm thinkin'," Billy Bates said.

They lay quietly, scanning the brightening prairie with the vigilance of hunted animals. But there was no sign of life on the prairie. The sun pushed the edge of its burning disk over the hills to the east and the shadows fled swiftly.

"Indians," Billy Bates said quietly.

"What? Where?"

Cody followed Billy's eyes. To the north, not more than a mile away, a little band of mounted Indians had suddenly broken from the timber and ridden out under cover of the ridge which here melted into the swells of the prairie.

They were acting strangely excited. They rode forward, stared long at the southwest, then wheeled and rode back. They seemed to hold excited palavers, before some of them would ride out again for another look.

"What's bitin' them redskins?" Cody wondered.

Billy Bates swung his glasses toward the southwest.

"Dust," he reported laconically.

"More Indians?"—

"Don't think so, Bill. Those over there are our Cheyennes all right and they're plumb excited."

"Well, shucks, we ain't expectin' any more company," Cody said, puzzled. "Couldn't be General Sheridan comin' out to see what's what, could it?"

"I think—yes, by Godfrey it is!" Bates said. "Our supply wagons! That's why the Indians are so excited! Lieutenant Hall must have driven all night again."

"And them murderin' redskins see a chance for loot!" Cody started to crawl backward off the ridge top. "Got to get back to King and warn him the wagons are runnin' into a trap. Come on, Billy."

They wormed backward until they were below the skyline, then ran for their horses. But even as they climbed into their saddles, a band of mounted Cheyennes rode out of the timber only a few hundred yards away.

"They saw us!" Bill Cody said. "Some of that fancy ridin' was just to hold our attention while these bucks rode to cut us off!"

His rifle snarled savage warning at the charging Indians. Billy Bates, just as quick, had his own carbine in action. Both men hurled lead as fast as they could pump the levers of their carbines even as they swung their horses with knee pressure to avoid the Indian charge.

Then, like actors appearing on cue, a fresh band of Cheyennes dashed, whooping, from the trees to cut off their retreat.

THE situation had become desperate. The Cheyennes were the best horsemen and fighters on the plains and the trap which sud-

denly had been sprung on the two white scouts was deadly.

But their own lives were the least important in this sudden turn of events. The wagons would be hit and probably destroyed before the soldiers were aware of what was happening. After all, they were depending upon the scouts to let them know when Indians were near. And the Cheyennes, past masters at this kind of warfare, had already deduced, from the presence of the scouts and the wagons, that there must be a sizable Army force in the neighborhood. Their own scouts would quickly find the camp of the Fifth.

If the Cheyennes thought the odds too great they would simply melt away. This was bad enough, since they would foil General Merritt's plan to check them from joining Sitting Bull. Worse, they might lay their own trap and wipe out the entire force.

All these possibilities flashed through the minds of the two scouts even as they drove their horses in a mad lunge for freedom. Guns were crashing steadily, but with everyone mounted on galloping horses, the chances of hits were slim, so far. However, the Indian vise was closing in rapidly.

"Ride!" Cody yelled. "We'll break through!"

He reversed his carbine and swung it like a club. With shrill, savage war-whoops, the Indians rode to meet them. War bonnets, flaming with color, streamed in the wind. Gun and tomahawk flashed in strong brown fingers. It was a wild and terrifying sight, one to freeze the blood. But to Cody and Billy Bates fear was a stranger, even fear of death. This was the way they expected to go when their time came. And although it might be a brutal and barbaric and bloody way to die, it was something they understood.

So they rode toward death with faces of men who are willing to trade blows with the Grim Reaper himself. They saw the triumphant Indians sweep closer, saw the upflung, brandished weapons, heard the shrill clamor of war-whoops rise deafeningly as the trap clamped down.

"We're done!" Cody panted. "Give 'em thunder, Billy!"

The horses came together with a crash. Billy Bates saw Cody swinging his carbine as a medieval warrior would swing a battle-axe, roaring defiance. Then a fiercely-painted savage loomed up in his own vision and a tomahawk flashed in the sun as it rose over his head.

Billy ducked under the sweep of the blade, shoved the butt end of his carbine smack into the warrior's teeth. The savage face was blotted out as the Cheyennes whirled backward over his horse's rump.

Hands clutched and tore at Billy. His beaver hat was snatched off, the carbine ripped from his grasp. Without knowing quite how it got there, his Colt was in his hand. He fired point-blank at a broad Indian chest, saw the red blotch spring out, and the Indian was gone. Billy was surrounded by howling, fighting red men. His horse was plunging in a frenzy of terror. Perhaps this alone had saved him from the finishing blow from a tomahawk.

Dazedly he still heard Bill Cody shouting and the boom of another Colt six-shooter. His hammer clicked down on an empty shell. As he rose in his stirrups to slash at an enemy cutting in from the side, a Cheyenne lance drove through the sleeve of his buckskin shirt and though it missed the flesh, nearly unseated him.

Blindly he tore it out, hardly realizing that somehow the press of charging bodies had dropped away. Then he heard Cody's roar and whirled. Buffalo Bill was surrounded by half a dozen Cheyennes. They pressed him fiercely with lance and tomahawk while he, like a lion at bay, parried their blows with his carbine and swung so fiercely that his savagery alone held them momentarily back.

But it could not last long. A warrior rode just outside the fight with lance poised, awaiting an opening for a cast that would end it.

There was no time for Billy Bates to ride down the warrior. As the Cheyenne poised his lance, Billy ripped his osage orange bow from his shoulders. His flying fingers plucked an arrow from its quiver. As the Cheyenne's arm came back for the cast, Billy's bow string twanged.

The lance went wild. The Cheyenne rose up in his stirrups stiffly with an arrow through his ribs and went crashing out of sight. The next instant Billy's horse had charged into the attackers and the fight was a melee once more.

In this moment of confusion, Billy Bates saw the face he had been looking for. He recognized it under the hideous war paint that smeared the savage features. Wild Horse, the Sioux who had boasted of murdering Custer! The yellow scalp still swung at his belt.

He recognized Billy Bates at the same instant and savage joy flamed in his eyes. These two, who had become implacable enemies at first sight, lunged toward one another.

At that moment a bugle laced its rapid golden notes across the meadow. With it came the swift rush of hoofs and a fresh outburst of firing. A Cheyenne warrior went down and another's horse reared and fell as Captain King's detachment raced into the fight. They were barely in time, too. Cody and Bates had been giving a good account of themselves, but two men cannot long fight twenty.

BUT the tide was suddenly turned. The Cheyennes melted along their horses' necks and streaked for the timber as bullets screamed around them. Bill Cody hauled up, laughing in excitement and relief. Then his laughter changed to consternation.

"Billy!" he roared. "Hey, come back here! Where you goin', you young fool!"

Billy Bates never heard him. His eyes were fixed on Wild Horse, and every ounce of energy was directed to keeping his mount in sight.

The Indians had split up and Wild Horse was heading off alone. But in Billy's present state of mind he would have followed the Sioux right through Sitting Bull's entire army.

They flashed through a patch of woods and left the sound and sight of the battle behind them. No other Indians were in sight. There were only the two of them in a world of trees and sun and grass, lashing their horses to greater and greater speed.

Billy's big bay was the faster, and gained steadily. Wild Horse, looked behind him every now and then, saw the white man steadily creeping up. He reloaded his rifle, then as they came to another spur of timber, he wheeled his horse into the trees, pulled up sharply and sprang down.

In a second, Billy Bates was confronted by a rifle barrel projecting from the cover of a tree trunk.

He dived headlong from the galloping mount. The gun blasted, too late, and the bullet shrieked overhead. Billy landed on his neck and shoulders, rolled like an acrobat and came up on his feet running.

His Colt was empty, but his sheath knife came naturally to his hand as he whipped around the tree trunk. Wild Horse was backing off, working the lever of his rifle frantically.

Billy's left hand knocked the rifle spinning. He charged. Wild Horse dodged, clawed for his own knife. Then they circled each other like two huge cats, each armed with a single shining claw.

"I am glad you come," the Sioux said hungrily. "I want your scalp—to hang alongside Yellow Hair's."

"Come and get it!" Billy defied. "If you don't, I'm takin' yours—for Custer!"

The Indian leaped in, swung his knife up with a vicious slash. Billy blocked it, thrust, felt his arm gripped cunningly, then they were struggling breast to breast in a deadly embrace. The one to break free now would be the one whose thrust went home.

Billy put his leg behind the Sioux and tripped him. They went down and rolled over and over, but the shock did not break their holds. Billy threw out a foot, got purchase and came out on top. He looked down into the Indian's hate-filled black eyes and knew what the outcome would be. Custer was here, fighting with him, Custer and the five companies of dead! His would only be the hand that held the knife. It would be the strength of all the murdered men that drove it home.

Scarcely conscious of strain he forced the blade down, down toward the Indian's chest. Wild Horse threw his magnificent muscles into one last spasm of resistance. And failed. His black eyes never lost their defiance as the knife drove home—until the light faded out of them.

Billy Bates clambered shaking to his feet. "A scalp for Custer," he said softly.

It was some time before he could catch his excited horse. So by the time he got back to camp, the battle of the War Bonnet was over and the Cheyennes in full flight southeastward—a flight that ended only when they poured back into the Red Cloud reservation where they hastily scrubbed off their war-paint and became peaceful reservation Indians again.

Bill Cody met Buffalo Billy Bates as the young scout trailed in with the grisly coup of his quest.

There was a strange look on the older man's face.

"Got news for you, Billy boy," he said. "Custer wasn't scalped, nor his body touched. He was found lyin' just as he fell, without a mark on him but the bullet wounds. His saber was by his side, his uniform just so."

Billy Bates turned astonished eyes on his friend.

"But—but Wild Horse—" he stammered.

"Wild Horse was a lyin', murderin' braggart," Cody said bitterly. "He got a yella-haired scalp off some poor trooper's skull and tried to make you think it was Custer's."

Billy Bates felt strangely empty inside. The rage had burned out and his whole pursuit and killing of Wild Horse was like a distant dream. Bill Cody put an arm around his shoulders.

"It's all right, son," he said. "You avenged some poor devil whose name we'll never know. And I reckon that's a scalp for Custer too. Now come along. We're gettin' ready to ride north and join Crook."

They turned together to stare northward, north to the mystic Montana plain where the Big Horn Mountains loomed as though watching and waiting for peace between red man and white.

Further Exciting Exploits of Billy Bates in

FRONTIER PERIL

By SCOTT CARLETON

A Swift-Moving Action Story—Coming Next Issue!

"You can't say that to me!" Dackri boils over in rage

HAM'S FINE FEATHERS

By ALFRED L. GARRY

After one sortie in gaudy apparel, Ham and Egg decide that hoss sense is plumb superior to spick an' span duds!

MY DEPUTY, Ham, sits hunched at his desk, his low-thatched brow gulched like the badlands. He's thumbing the Mears & Sawbuck wish-book, setting down the cost of what he wants. When he tries to total the column, he's in worse misery than a nester trying to figure the interest on an overdue note at the bank.

Poor Ham, he ain't no good at ciphering, having to keep track of his bar bill at Freddie's by whittling a notch in the bar for each drink. Finally he gets the figures added, and fixes me with a fishy eye.

"Egg," he says, solemn as a new judge sentencing his first man to hang, "as minions of the law, we're a disgrace to Sweetgrass County."

"What yuh mean?" I slide to my feet off the desk, plumb riled. "We got the best darned law-abidin' county in all Montaner! Except, mebbe, for that French Canuck Dackri, we

could herd every hairpin in this country past St. Peter, and into the pearly corral."

"That ain't what I mean!" Ham soothes, "I ain't castin' none of them aspersions on our badge-totin' characteristics."

"What's rowelin' yuh then?"

"We ain't got no dignity of the law." Ham goes on. "Look at us!"

"All I see is a couple of smart cowhands wise enough to tote the badge when they got too old to take the rough off broomtails," I interrupt.

"Yeah! And just look at yuh!" Ham levels his trigger finger at my sombrero. "Yuh go around lookin' like a grub-linin' saddle bum! Both of us look more like scarecrows than sheriffs!"

"I got money in the bank!" I shoot back, gettin' hot under the collar.

"One would never know it by yore gear!" Ham snorts. "Or mine either, pardner."

Ham says the last with sort of a whine. And I know danged well I shoulda kept my mouth shut about my *dinero* in the bank. Ham's got a hen on the nest. And his plans always cost me money.

"Yeah, that's just it." Ham continues. "We got no class. Our sombreros are sweat-stained and dusty. Our vests are soup-dappled; our levis are patched on patch like a crazy quilt; and our boots are scuffed and run over at the heels. Look at yore spurs! They don't even match. One is held on with hay wire. Bah! The dignity of the law! We are a plumb disgrace to the statutes of Montaner!"

"Aw, Ham, we never did go in for dudin' up our gear."

"No." Ham points his finger out the window. "Fancy clothes don't keep them jaspers from gettin' their man!"

I look out and see a Canadian Mounted Police officer striding down the plank walk in the direction of our office. And ain't he a sight for sore eyes! His stiff-brim hat looks like it just came out of a bandbox. His handsome red coat fits him as though he was poured into it. His cutter is belted on backwards, and has got a gleaming white rope running from the butt to around his high-collared neck.

Why, even a rheumatic pilgrim could shoot him sick before he'd be able to wrastle his gun clear of all the polished gear he's got it cluttered with. There ain't a speck of dust on his high-polished riding boots, although from the ship shot weariness of his mount, I know he's rode down from the Canadian border since sun-up. Likely with some kind of special authority to invade our bailiwick for some smart hombre that's skipped across the Border.

"A lawman packing all that han'some gear would always be thinkin' about keepin' spick and span—instead of collectin' hootowls," I crack.

"Oh, the mounties do all right," Ham observed drily. "Wonder what his royal nibs wants?"

Just then the mountie steps up, clicks his heels and gives us a snappy salute.

"I'm Corporal Stilton, Royal Northwest Mounted Police," he says. "I come to enlist your cooperation."

"Shore, shore." Ham waves his hand toward a chair. "Say, Bud, how much did them boots cost yuh?"

"Two guineas," the mountie replies stiffly.

"Look here, yuh young whippersnapper!" Ham leaps to his feet, his face flushing red with temper. "Yuh can't call me and Egg a couple of guineas in our own office!"

"No offense, sir." The lad is considerable taken back. "I merely stated that the boots cost two guineas, about two pounds."

"Pounds of what?" Ham is suspicious as a wolf sniffing a poisoned bait. "Yuh can't make no monkey outa me!"

"Wouldn't take much tryin'!" I crack behind my mustache.

"Oh, I forgot. You don't understand English money. So sorry!" The mountie's face lights up with a plumb disarming smile. "A guinea is an English gold coin, worth about five dollars."

"Now yuh're talkin' sense!" Ham eases up. He holds out the peace pipe, saying, "No hard feelin's. Let's step over to Freddie's for a drink."

"First, I'd like to tell you why I'm here," Stilton says.

"Shoot," Ham says.

MAY have to." Stilton's face gets serious. "Scotland Yard in London has ordered the Mounted Police to obtain a sample of the gold that Frenchy Dackri is washing out of the Milk River, here in your county. We have obtained special authority for me to come down here and look into the matter."

"Frenchy's mighty touchy about his diggin's," I volunteer. "Won't let anyone set foot on his claims. Has a bunch of North Woods Indians and French Canucks, who can't speak English, guardin' his holdin's."

"Don't spend any of his dust in these parts," Ham adds. "Ships it all to a New York firm. We're interested, too. Suspect him of eatin' stole beef."

"My orders are to get a sample of his gold," Stilton informs us seriously. "Illegally if necessary."

"Yuh mean yuh've got to steal it?" Ham inquires.

"If necessary." Stilton nods.

"Give me the address of the feller who made them two-guinea boots for yuh, and I'll get yuh a sample of French Dackri's gold." Ham bargains. "The frog-eater is in town for supplies right now."

"It's a deal," Stilton agrees.

Ham shoves his considerable wad of eating tobacco into the side of his cheek, and ties his bandanna around his lopsided face.

"What the tarnation?" I ask, plumb mystified.

"Frenchy Dackri's a right onery and no-account cuss," Ham mumbles. "But I'm aimin' to appeal to his better nature."

"He ain't got one!" I reply, loosing my six-gun in the holster. "I'll side yuh."

"So will I," Stilton offers.

"Now, listen, Little Red Ridin' Coat." Ham motions to his desk. "You just set there and look at the pretty pictures in the Mears and Sawbuck catalogue. If this hairpin, Dackri, commences to throw lead, I don't want to make no international incident out of it by havin' to ship yore carcass back over the Border."

Stilton's jaw juts out, and his face gets the same color as his coat.

"No go!" he snaps. "I can take care of myself in a brawl!"

"Then yuh'd better clear yore gun of all that clutterin' gear." Ham shrugs. "This Dackri's got a temper like fulminate of mercury!"

"The Northwest Mounted Police seldom have to resort to firearms!" Stilton declares loftily. "I can take care of myself!"

Ham puts on his most doleful face as he clumps into Freddie's Bar, and slides up alongside of Dackri. The Frenchman, who's built big and hairy as a grizzly, scowls at Ham, edging away. A lawman-hater.

"What's wrong?" Freddie asks, setting out Ham's glass.

"Got a powerful misery in my wisdom tooth." Ham whines, laying his lopsided jaw in the palm of his hand, and rocking his head back and forth as though he's in mortal agony. "Doc Rudow, over at Buckstrap, got the tooth all drilled out, and then found he didn't have any powdered gold to make an amalgam fillin'. Oh-o-o-o!"

Ham moans so convincing that Freddie don't mark the drink down in his tick book. But Dackri only glares suspiciously, edging farther away down the bar.

"Frenchy"—Ham rolls his eyes beseechingly—"could yuh spare a sufferin' mortal a pinch of yore gold dust?"

"Not by a jugful!" Dackri growls. "I wouldn't give a *gendarme* the sweat off my boot soles!"

"Aw, just a toothful!" Ham pleads, plumb convinced that there's something mighty fishy about Frenchy's gold. "I'll pay."

"Don' crowd me!" Dackri growls. "Don' crowd me! Stay away!"

I can see Ham's game. He's downright sure the Frenchman's big placer operation ain't on the up and up. He wants an excuse to jug the parleyvoo so's we can do a little sleuthing.

"Dackri," Ham's voice is woodenly level, "I've knowed all kinds of assorted and low-down polecats. But by refusin' me a hollow toothful of yore gold dust, yuh've put yoreself at the head of my skunk list! Dackri, yuh're a smelly polecat, and a disgrace to humanity!"

"You can' say that to me!" The short-tempered snail-eater boils over in a rage.

"I'll repeat it!" Ham bellows back, shoving his upturned face right up to Dackri's bristling whiskers. "Want to make somethin' personal out of it?"

"The law spiks ver' brave!" Dackri snorts tauntingly. "Come out from behin' that star, fat wart!"

Sputtering, my pardner unpins his star and, unbuckling his cutters, tosses them on the bar. His pudgy fists saw the air as he circles around, ducking and shadow-boxing like John L. Sullivan. It makes no difference to him that Dackri tops him by a head. Ham plumb fancies himself as a skull and knuckle fighter. Dackri, his small jet eyes gleaming with cunning, tosses his gun onto the bar, and squares off.

Now, Ham's fancy footwork and ducking is just so much window dressing. Dackri's first wild swing catches Ham high on the head and busts him tail over tea kettle, like a hoolihanned steer. Ham bounces to his feet, all idear of fancy fisticuffs knocked from his head. My pardner puts down his noggin, starts both his short arms swinging like a windmill in a tornado, and plows into Dackri.

Frenchy don't have to be a toreador to sidestep Ham's bull-like rush. As Ham rushes past Dackri lambastes him another haymaker on the head. That's where the frog-eater makes a big mistake. With the explosive crack of his knuckles on Ham's bald pate, an agonized grunt escapes from the miner and he winces with pain. He's smashed his hand!

DACKRI backs off. But not quick enough. Ham, his head still down, blindly rushes him, arms a-flailing. One of his wild overhanded swings lands flush on the Frenchman's whisker pasture. Dackri staggers back, bumps into the bar, and slumps to a groggy bleary-eyed sitting position alongside of one of Freddie's big brass gabboons.

He shakes his whiskery head like a bullet-creased bear. A sly, crafty look comes into his close-set eyes as he hunches up, weaving unsteadily.

Over anxious to knock him into the middle of next week, Ham lowers his head and sails in. He figures Dackri is ripe for the Sunday punch, and is plumb reckless.

The tricky Frenchy swoops down, grabs the gabboon, and quick as a flash, jams it down over Ham's pile-driving head. Ham tugs wildly at his gabboon helmet, floundering like a bear with its head caught in a honey can. The barflies hoot their heads off, laughing at Ham's antics. Dackri, a wide, self-satisfied grin curling his lips, whirls Ham around and plants his moccasin swiftly where my bent-over pardner's chaps don't cover.

The crowd roars at Ham's ludricrous ignominy. I'm not too sorry either. Them kicks don't hurt. Because, like so many *voyageurs*, Dackri is wearing moccasins. Ham's learning the hard way not to be so eager to unpin his badge and engage in personal fisticuffs.

But Stilton, who's got the mountie's stiff-necked idear of the dignity of the law, ain't

enjoying the spectacle. He tosses his fancy gun-belt onto a table and rips off his red coat with its badge of authority. Rushing forward, he grabs Dackri's arm, whirling him around.

"Stop it!" he barks.

Dackri jerks free, aiming another insolent kick at Ham's unprotected rear.

"Don' butt in, Redcoat!" Dackri snarls. "You got no authority in de States!"

"My authority's back there!" Stilton jerks his head toward his beautiful red coat, an untidy heap on the sawdust floor.

"So-o-o!" Dakri's beard bristles like a prody porkypine. "Now I give you a tas'e of the boot!"

With that, Dakri lashes a sudden vicious kick at the mountie's groin. Stilton, alert as a cat, jerks back, the moccasin grazing his buttons. It's dirty pool! But I ain't interfering—yet.

"*Le savate?*" Stilton barks the question anxiously.

"*Le savate!*" Dackri growls the reply. "Don' lak, eh?"

A QUEER hush blankets the crowd. Stilton seems to quail, his face tallow-colored. He takes a few quick steps backward, retreating. The crowd thinks, and I do, too, that when he took off his red coat, his nerve was shed with it. Dackri senses Stilton is showing a white feather.

Mouthing savage curses, the berserk miner hurls himself headlong after the back-pedaling mountie. His arms are outstretched, fingers clawed, over-eager. I finger the butt of my cutter, ready to jump in and bend it over the head of the fight-crazy miner before he maims Stilton, who's backing away in a panic. What's that *le savate* business that took all the starch out of the kid?

Suddenly Stilton halts in his flight, pivoting gracefully on one foot like a dancer. And the other foot, carrying all the momentum of his headlong flight, arcs through the air like a chorus girl's high kick. The toe of his polished two-guinea boot explodes on the point of Dackri's forward-jutting, unprotected jaw. The big miner goes down like a axed-knocked steer.

"French *savate* fighting," Stilton explains calmly to the slack-jawed crowd. "It's much easier on the hands than Ham's method."

Just then Ham manages to wrastle the gabboon off his head. He blinks. Then he sees Dackri stretched in the sawdust, stiffer and colder than a frozen pump handle.

"Knew I connected once," Ham comments, rubbing his bruised knuckles and thinking he'd knocked Dackri stiff when his fist smashed the bar. "Let that be a lesson to any of you fellers who think yuh can get ahead of Ham Hamilton! With, or without his badge!" he adds as an afterthought.

Stilton, grinning broadly, holds up his hand to the tittering crowd. He's a good egg to let Ham think he's polished off the miner. The three of us leave as Freddie comes around the bar with a pail of water to revive the sleeping beauty.

"We certainly have spoiled any chance we may of had to get some of Dackri's gold dust legitimately," Stilton says seriously. "Now I'll have to resort to strategy."

"Write yore own ticket," Ham says. "Me an' Egg'll be deaf, dumb and blind."

"Only be careful, lad," I caution. "Yuh might get yore ticket punched before yuh even start. Dackri ain't one to forget that kick in the whiskers."

And he shore don't. Two days later they bring Stilton in on a bed of hay in the Bar 7 chuckwagon. A drygulcher has punched his ticket with a .30-30 slug. He's alive. But the big dark stain on his handsome red coat tells he's lost considerable blood. Bringing him through is going to be a job.

"We'd better wire the Mounted Police Headquarters in Alberta," I say. "I don't want Stilton to die on our hands and make trouble."

"In the meantime, I'll go out and collect Dackri," Ham says, and spins the cylinder of his .45.

"For why?"

"There's no doubt about him bein' the one who bushwhacked Stilton," Ham states. "I'll have him here so's when the mounties come for Stilton, they can take Dackri back with 'em."

"Hold yore hosses!" I counsel. "Yuh can't prove a thing! There's more to this than meets the eye. Let's lay low, and let the Mounted Police deal the cards."

WELL, sir, if I ever thought Stilton was turned out like a bandbox dandy, you should have seen the ramrod-backed, clipped-mustached Major of the Mounties who came to take Stilton back to Alberta. His gear is faultless. Why, me and Ham look like a couple of ruff-coated broomtails alongside of him. The major, who bites his sentences short, runs a critical eye over us.

"Summon the chief law enforcement officer of the district," he snaps.

"I'm it," I say, giving my tarnished star a rub with my shirt sleeve.

The major runs his steely blue eye over me slowly. Carefully, from the toes of my corral-scuffed boots, to the battered crown of my sweat-stained sombrero. He's plumb disgusted, I guess, because he shuts up like a clam.

"Let Dackri alone!" He don't request. He commands. "When Stilton recovers, he'll return and take over. Good day."

"There!" Ham gloats as they carry Stilton on a stretcher onto the train. "I guess yuh've been put in yore place, Mr. Scarecrow!"

I don't say a word. I didn't have one to say.

"Yuh shore have!" Ham goes on, rubbing salt in my hurt feelings. "That spit and polish major, who'd bite the head plumb off a mountie for having a midge speck on his mirror-pol-

ished boots don't think much of us as lawmen."

"Aw—"

I try to shut up Ham. But he's running off at the mouth as persuasive as a lightning-rod salesman.

"It's our get-up." Ham don't brook no interruptions. "We're the best darned lawmen in the State of Montaner! But do we look it? Not by a jugful! You and me are a disgrace! What we need is some high-class gear that'll set us apart from the run-of-the-chute lawmen! Foofraw! That's what! We got to smart up!"

"I'm satisfied." I try to get a word in edgeways.

"Bah! Yuh're a plumb disgrace!" Ham taps his trigger finger on my star. Leaning closer, he commences to wheedle. "Egg, I know yuh got that money in the bank. Banks ain't always safe. They go bust. That's why yuh should enjoy yore money. Now, pard, just hand it over to me. I'll guarantee yuh won't feel outcast as a sheepherder at a cattlemen's barbecue the next time Stilton and his elegant mounties return."

Well, I got a soft head. I let Ham have my money. He gets a tape measure, and surveys me like a land promoter laying out a town-site. He makes up his list, borrowing six dollars and eighty cents from Freddie because even with all my money we ain't got enough, and sends away for our foofraw gear.

Folks, when them two big packing cases arrive, Ham's like a kid that's found Santa Claus' pack. But me, I'm more cagey.

"Ham," I say, "all this new gear's goin' to make us mighty self-conscious. Let's go out to the deserted Barrel Hoop ranchhouse and try it on."

"Mebbe yuh're right," Ham agrees. "But first we got to get haircuts, and have our mustaches trimmed."

Hank, the barber, thinks we're locoed when Ham instructs him to trim our elegant down-sweeping handlebar mustaches close-cropped, like that Mounted Police major's.

"No good!" Hank shakes his head doleful as he snips away. "What's goin' to keep yore teeth warm in a blizzard now? Look at that Frenchman, Dackri. He drives his team all over this country in the dead of winter. Even at forty below, his full-bearded face never gets frostbit."

"Yeah," Ham says casual-like, because Hank's gossipy as an old maid. "Seen Dackri lately?"

"Was in town last week," Hank says. "Shipped out two heavy chests of gold. Bill Williams says he seen him Monday over at Spurstrap pickin' up five heavy packing cases at the depot. Musta been some new machinery. Seems somebody's always tellin' me about Dackri pickin' up shipments of machinery. Plenty smart he is, too. He's not having much of it come to any one town. That frog-eater must have a mint, he's so darned secretive!"

"Yeah." Ham nods. "Yeah."

MY FACE shore feels plumb naked with the mustache whittled down. Ham borrows a buckboard, loads the boxes behind, and with our mounts tied to the end gate, we set out for the deserted Barrel Hoop ranchhouse.

When I set my eyes on what Ham's throwed away my money on, I'm fit to be tied. First there's our hoss gear. The new saddles are basket stamped and flowered, spangled with silver conchas like a Mexican *charro's* best Sunday outfit. Why, Ham's even included currycombs! My range-bred cayuse would jump a mile if anyone tickled him with a currycomb.

But when Ham commences to dish out our personal raiment, I'm plumb throwed and dumbstruck! There's boots stitched with rainbow-colored thread and inlayed with red Spanish leather flowers; double-seated peg-top fawn-colored riding breeches, and bright green silk shirts.

Them malachite-colored shirts wouldn't have been so bad if Ham hadn't gone and had,

VOTE FOR HAM AND EGG NEXT ELECTION

stitched in five-inch red letters on the backs. Anyway, the fancy shirts and breeches will be partly covered by the pink angora-haired chaps and leopard-skin vests Ham's bought. We'll shore look like a rainbow on a spree! I know a lot of hairpins who'll figger they got the D.T.s the first time they see us.

As I commence to buckle on my old hipguns, Ham shouts:

"Whoa! I got us somethin' really classy!"

Out of the box Ham pulls a brace of pearl-handled nickel-plated .45s in elegant low-cut holsters. There's fancy stamped leather cartridge belts to match. I commence transferring my loads into the new belt. But Ham stays my hand.

"None of that junk!" he says, proud as an old maid showing off an engagement ring. "Look what I got for us. Class, eh!"

Ham breaks open a box of shells. No, they ain't shells.. They are outright jewelry! The stubby, blunt-nosed .45 cartridges have been nickel-plated and polished until they gleam and sparkle like silver stars on a frosty night. Foofraw at its dangdest.

"Ham," I crawfish, feeling foolish as a pig in a sunbonnet, "I can't face the fellers in Sweetgrass right off the bat. I got to get used to this peacock grandeur gradual-like. Let's camp out here for a few days, wearin' the new off these gaudy circus outfits."

"Nope." Ham shakes his head. "Might dirty up our gear. That mountie, Stilton, should be well by now. I been expecting him for some time to turn up to get hunk with Dackri. We got to side him."

"Why not just box up our gear and save it to wear just when he's in town?" I ask hopeful.

"Nothin' doing!" Ham snaps. "But just to start facing folks kinda gradual, we'll put on

all our duds tomorrow and visit that sheepherder over yonder. Bet we'll plumb knock his eyes out!"

The next morning even our broncs lay back their ears and rear up, suspicious of all our glittering foofraw. I feel silly as a cowhand at a stiff-shirt wedding. But what the heck! We're just going over the hill to impress a sheepherder. And if he don't die laughing, maybe later we can sorta get the hairpins at Sweetgrass used to our circus gear.

AS WE ride up, the herder comes out of his wagon, rubbing his face on a dirty towel. Man, I've seen woollie tenders from Albuquerque to Alberta. But this hombre shore is a woefully bushed specimen. You can't tell how old he is because his face is covered with a bacon grease and egg yoke beard. His lank hair curls down over his vest, which is white-dusted with dandruff. I'm willing to bet three to one that some of that dandruff is the galloping kind. His patched clothes are shiny stiff with lanolin grease. Actually, I ain't comfortable until I get to his up-wind side.

"Who's gettin' married?" The sheepherder blinks at our glittering grandeur.

"No one," Ham says. "We're the dignity of the law!"

"I ain't done nothin'!" the herder whines. "Nothin'!"

"Shore, shore—I know yuh ain't," Ham soothes, just like he was calming a spooked bronc. "This is just a sociable call."

"Oh, want a cup of coffee?" the herder cackles. "Shore yuh do. Only I ain't got none. How about some tea?"

"No thanks!" me and Ham quick-chime together.

"Where yuh from?" Ham asks.

"North," the herder states. "Wanta look at my papers?"

"No," Ham dismisses. "Where yuh headin'?"

"Over that way." The herder waves an indefinite arm that takes in half the horizon.

"Better stay away from the Milk River," Ham advises. "A Frenchman named Dackri is washin' gold along a considerable stretch. Has out Injun guards. Don't tolerate trespassers. So keep away."

"He wouldn't hurt a poor sheepherder, would he?" Again the feller's voice is a whine. "Some mighty good-looking grass along the river benches. I—I'd even give him a lamb."

"If he didn't take a dozen!" Ham cracks. "No, yuh'd better steer clear of Dackri!"

As we rein away, our gear flashing and clattering in the morning sun, Ham flecks a spot of dust off his shirt pocket.

"Well," he says, "we've made our first contact. And wearing this gear didn't kill nobody."

"Yeah, unless the darned herder's laughing hisself to death behind our backs!" I snort. Then I inquire sarcastic, "Didn't happen to be usin' yore eyes while we was in his camp, did yuh?"

"I saw nothin' but a near-locoed herder," Ham waves off my sarcasm.

"Outside." I nod. "But I don't suppose yuh noticed that his bunk inside the sheep wagon was made up as neat as a trooper's? Or that his smoke-pole was shined up like a barber's bald head? Nope! Yuh was so blinded by yore own dazzling gear that yuh didn't spot the hundred-buck range glasses on the shelf over his bunk!"

"Mebbe he served a hitch in the Army." Ham shrugs. "Them neat habits sometimes stay with an ex-soldier all his life."

"Yeah!" I think to myself. "Whoever saw a tea-drinkin' ex-soldier?"

When we jangle into Sweetgrass, resplendent as a couple of knights in bright tin suits, you coulda knocked the eyes off of the citizens with a stick. Our brilliant splendor causes some of the hairpins to reel, clutching their eyes as they mockingly stagger about like sunstruck —desert prospectors.

"Joinin' up with Buffalo Bill's show?" someone catcalls. "Or are yuh just goin' to a masquerade?"

But me and Ham maintain our dignity, and don't pay no attention to the uncouth jibes. And it ain't two days before some of them self-same mockers are borrowing our Mears & Sawbuck catalogue to send off for some gay duds themselves.

"I'm going to put Sweetgrass on the map as a cowman's sartorial town!" Ham boasts. "Let's ride over to Spurstrap and make Sheriff Rawson feel like a poor relation!"

We take a short-cut across Bear Mountains. As we come to the crest of the pass, we notice a plume of skyward-rising black smoke over north by the Milk River.

"Ain't natural," Ham opines. "Let's have a look-see."

We top a rise and look down on the smoldering remains of a sheep wagon. It ain't hard to read sign. The herder was cooking his breakfast. A bunch of mounted men sneaked down a draw, rushing him. Empty cartridges scattered around tells there was some shooting. But there's no sign of blood. Nobody was hurt in the melee.

"Let's get goin'," Ham says. "Just a bunch of cattlemen hoorawin' a sheepherder off their rightful grass. Come on."

"Hold yore hosses!" I point to the ashes of the campfire. "What yuh make of that?"

"Moccasin print!" Ham whistles.

"And tea leaves!" I add.

"Dackri's the only one around here who wears moccasins." Ham shoves back his forty-dollar sombrero and curries his thatch thoughtful. "He's no cattleman. What's he got against woollies?"

"Nothin'," I think out loud. "But I'll bet he's got a danged good reason for not likin' a tea-drinkin' sheepherder."

The trail leads off toward the Milk River. I certainly cuss Ham for our foofraw gear.

We glitter like a heliograph, creak like a sun-dried wagon wheel, and jingle like a gypsy dancer's tambourine. We're making so much racket that we couldn't sneak up on a deaf and blind tenderfoot in a boiler shop. Finally Ham breaks down.

"Egg, we got to do it!" He almost sobs, his face plumb doleful.

"What?"

"Shuck this noisy gear."

Brother, he don't have to say them words twice! Like a couple of kids at a swimming hole, we race each other, pulling off our pink angora chaps, leopard-skin spotted vests, and our extra fancy green shirts with their dollar-sized pearl buttons.

In his long underwear roly-poly Ham looks like a kewpie doll with an oversized bustle. I guess my droop-seated appearance don't take any prizes either. But at least we'll be able to skulk through the brush without sounding like a charivari.

BUT I frown as I buckle on my foxy nickel-plated six-guns and their belts of gleaming nickel plated cartridges. They catch the light, glistening and sparkling like John L. Sullivan's diamond-studded heavyweight championship belt.

"No good, eh?" Ham worries. "The sun flashin' off our guns will draw Dackri's guards like a spinner attracts trout."

"If we wait until dark, it might be too late," I say, and nod. "We'll have to rush the camp, and smoke it up."

"Smoke!" Ham slaps his thigh. "That's it! We'll smoke up our shiny guns!"

Ham lights a dry pine cone, holding his cutter in the black resinous smoke. It works. In a few moments our bright guns and loads are dull sooty black.

We scout ahead, wiggle out on a river bench, and look down into Dackri's diggings. It ain't like any placer operation I've seen. There's a big water-wheel in the river that's belted to a good-sized metal cylinder, tumbling it over and over like a churn. But that ain't what takes our eyes.

In the center of a ring of ten North Woods Injuns is Dackri. He's holding the cringing sheepherder by a handful of dirty vest, shaking him like a terrier shakes a rat.

"What you doin' aroun' here?" Dackri bellows. "Spyin' on me?"

"I wasn't spyin'," the sheepherder mumbles, his eyes rolling up the whites with mortal terror. "I was lookin' for some stray sheep."

"With these glasses?" Dackri shakes the expensive range glasses under the man's nose. "You lie!"

Dackri lashes the trembling herder across the mouth with a savage back-hand blow.

"No—no!" the man screams. "I stold the glasses from a Government survey party."

"So?" Dackri is silky smooth, enjoying himself as a cat enjoys playing with a dazed and helpless mouse. "Then how abou' this gun? Sheepherders don' have good guns!"

"I stold that, too."

"Tell the truth!"

Dackri whips out his knife. He holds the quivering point on the yammering herder's Adam's apple.

"Confess you are a spy!" Dackri roars.

Ham looks at me. I nod. This thing has gone far enough. Dackri in his mounting rage is apt to slit that poor feller's throat. Jerking out our cutters, we jump off the bench into the clearing.

"Sky yore hands!" I bellow. "All of yuh!"

Dackri hurls the sheepherder from him, his knife arm whipping back for the throw. I slip my thumb off the hammer.

Click.

A misfire.

I hear Ham's ready gun click. A misfire too!

In reckless panicky haste me and Ham slip our hammers. *Click, click, click!* Every danged load a misfire! It comes to me in a flash! Them fancy gaudy nickel-plated bullets! They're made for show. Not for shooting! Fakes!

Dackri senses our helplessness. His raised knife, poised for the throw, steadies. He don't have to hurry it. We're helpless as fish in a barrel, and he's going to enjoy our plight to the fullest.

OUT of the corner of my eye, I see the sheepherder. Cringing and groveling, he's crawling on his tummy like a whipped dog toward Dackri. As Dackri's arm whizzes forward, the sheepherder leaps to his feet, caroms into the miner, spoiling his aim. The knife clatters into the brush.

An Indian swoops for a rifle. Dackri claws at his gun. The herder, buck-jumping like a scared deer, leaps clear of Dackri. His boot describes a swishing arc. The whizzing toe crashes into Dackri's jaw, cracking like a pistol shot, and all but tearing his head from his shoulders. His half-drawn gun slips from his senseless fingers. His knees cave, and the big miner pitches to his face.

The Indian with the rifle levers out a wild, quick shot. Ham, charging like an express train, wraps his useless cutter barrel around the fellow's head. I grab the rifle, snap a shot at a fleeing Indian, bringing him up short. In no time we've got the whole kit and kaboodle hog-tied.

When the last knot is tied, that sheepherder does the dangdest thing. Like a shot he beelines for the cookhouse, grabs a bar of yellow soap and, shedding his clothes on the run, he dives into the river. Lathering furiously, he ducks and blows like a porpoise.

"Ham," he shouts joyfully, "find me a razor and comb!"

"Stilton!" Ham gasps, slack-jawed, recognizing the voice.

"What the devil?" I want to know.

"Another day in this crumby sheepherder disguise and I'd have gone crazy!" Stilton laughs, shaving with great reckless swipes.

"But what—"

"It was the only way I could get close enough to Dackri's diggings to make sure of something."

"Something?" Ham asks.

"Sure." Stilton grins. "Open up that metal tumbler."

Ham stops the tumbling churnlike cylinder, unscrews the latch, and opens it. Reaching in, he brings up a handful of wet river sand and four or five twenty-dollar gold pieces.

"What'n all thunder?" Ham can't savvy it.

"We've just busted up an international ring of gold coin sweaters," Stilton says, enjoying the feel of his clean-shaved jaw.

"Sweaters?" I ask.

"Yes," Stilton goes on. "You see, this ring of crooks would buy newly-minted gold coins all over Europe and America, and ship them out to Dackri to be sweated down. To do this, he's put them in that tumbler with sharp sand. The churning would wear off some of the gold. But not too much. Just enough so that the worn gold coins could be shipped back and would pass for full value. He'd then wash the gold dust from the sand in the tumbler, and sell it like a legitimate miner."

"That's why he was always pickin' up shipments of 'machinery' at the different towns all over Montaner and Alberta!" Ham sees the light. "The no-good crook!"

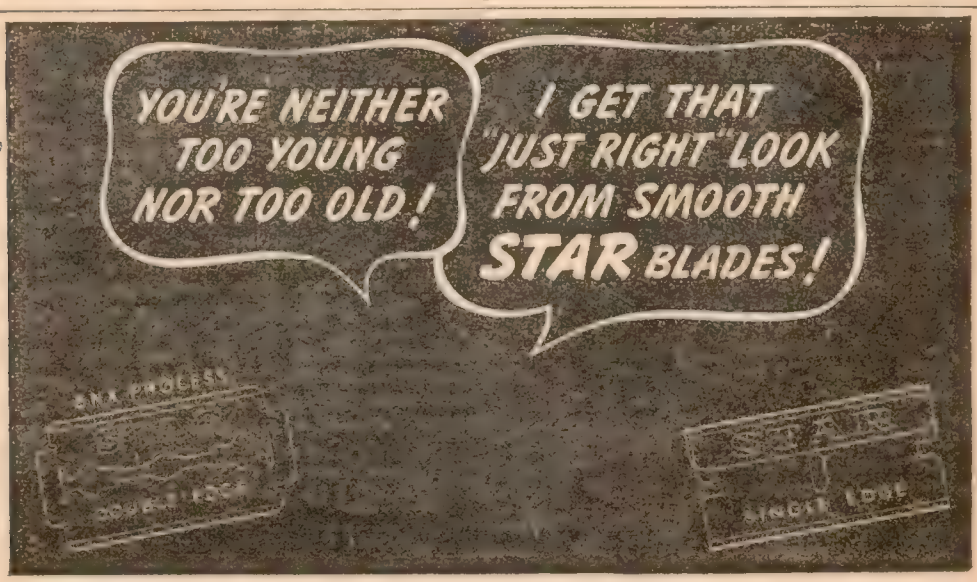
"Say!" Stilton's plenty puzzled at seeing us in our underwear. "Where's your clothes?"

"Oh! Gee!"

In the heat of the battle me and Ham have clean forgot that we're running around in our droopy drawers. Ham strides over to the camp's clothes-line and takes down a faded blue shirt and a pair of patched levis.

"Corporal Stilton," my pardner says seriously, pulling on the old clothes, "yuh're lookin' at a couple of fine-feathered birds who have plumb and forever molted!"

Walt Jason faces grim murder suspicion as he battles to save his ranch in THE VALIANT FIGHT, *a two-fisted novelet by* JACKSON COLE—*Coming in the next issue!*



LOYAL OUTFIT

By JOHN X. BROWN

Foreman Jim Norton smashes a range frame-up!

HANK DOYLE just nodded to the other men who came out of the Bar J bunkhouse as he finished washing up at the pump. Doyle never was a man to say much but the rest of the outfit found him friendly enough in his quiet way. He was a lean, dark-haired young waddy with plenty of range savvy and made a right good cowhand.

The rest of the outfit were laughing and talking a lot like they will when they are all feeling good at dawn on a right nice spring morning. Old Lem Hawk, the ranch cook, came to the door of the cook shack and started pounding on a frying pan with a spoon and yelling so he could be heard a mile.

"Come and get it or I'll throw it away!" Lem shouted. "Rattle yore hocks—I ain't got all day."

"Reckon the feller what said dawn comes up like thunder must have had this outfit in mind," remarked Jim Norton, the foreman of the Bar J. "Leastwise, it shore sounds like it now."

The men headed for the cook shack and old Lem stopped his noise. Hank Doyle hesitated before he followed the others—like he wasn't so sure he wanted any breakfast. Which was strange, since he was usually a right good eater.

Norton had been foreman on the spread for close on to fifteen years and he held his job by noticing things that another man might have overlooked. He had been watching Doyle and he dropped back to walk along beside the waddy.

"Have a good time in town last night, Hank?" the foreman asked. "Yuh got back kind of late."

"It was all right—I guess," Doyle said. "I had some business to tend to and I stayed in town longer than I figgered on doin'." He looked at the foreman as though he meant to say more than that but he evidently changed his mind. "Got into a poker game at the Owl Head Saloon," he said casually, instead.

Doyle didn't say any more than that, and Jim Norton didn't ask any further questions. He figured that if Doyle wanted to tell him about that trip to town the waddy would probably do it when he got around to it. The foreman knew that Doyle's business in Coyoteville must have been right important or he wouldn't have asked the Old Man to let him go to town.

Long about the time breakfast was over and the men were roping and saddling their horses for the day's work a bunch of riders came along the road and swung into the ranch. With Sheriff Dan Lang riding at the head of the horsemen it didn't take much guessing to see it was a posse.

"Howdy, Sheriff," Norton greeted, as he led

JIM NORTON

his horse out through the corral gate. "Yuh must be out lookin' for trouble bright and early."

"We are," Sheriff Lang said shortly. "An hombre held up the Owl Head Saloon last night and took all the money in the place. Killed the bartender, too."

"Sounds like a right considerable job for one man."

Norton noted that the rest of the Bar J outfit had gathered closer to hear what was going on. Most of them were on their horses and ready to ride.

"Usually quite a lot of folks in the saloon," the foreman commented.

"It was late when it happened," said the sheriff. "Around two in the mornin'. The saloon was just closin' up. The hombre that done it shore had his nerve. Didn't even wear a mask."

"Anybody recognize him?" asked Norton.

"Four men," said Sheriff Lang. "Thorn Nash, who owns the Owl Head, Blackie Grew, the gambler, and a couple of other hombres."

"Who was it?" demanded Norton, getting suspicious now.

"They claim it was one of the Bar J outfit," the sheriff said quietlike, as he looked steadily at the men gathered behind Norton. "Hank Doyle, so they say."

"Why, I—" Doyle sat his saddle, glaring at the sheriff. "It ain't true! I played poker at the Owl Head last night with Nash, Grew and Sam Richmond and Buck Harvey. A right friendly game. I lost a little of the money I just inherited from my uncle, but not much."

"That ain't the way they tell it," growled the sheriff. "They claim yuh come into the saloon late, with a gun in yore hand and demanded all the money in the place. Five thousand dollars it was that you got."

"Five thousand dollars!" Jim Norton blinked as he heard the amount that had been stolen. "The Owl Head shore was doin' good for an off night."

"Thorn Nash explained that," said Lang. "The robber got all the money that the saloon owner had saved up in the past two months." The sheriff frowned like he had a job to do he didn't care to handle. "But there's no use talkin'. I'm placin' yuh under arrest, Doyle. We're headin' back to town right now."

As the sheriff's words died away it grew quiet and grim. The Bar J outfit were a loyal bunch and Hank Doyle was one of them. Even though he was wanted by the law they would all side him if it came to a six-gun showdown.

"I'll go," Doyle said quietly. "Though there's somethin' strange about this." He glanced at the foreman. "There's a clean shirt in the saddle-bag under my bunk, Jim. Would yuh mind bringin' it to me later? I might need it after I stay in jail a while."

"Shore, Hank." The foreman nodded. "Be glad to do it."

The posse rode away with their prisoner. The Bar J outfit watched them go, not saying anything but feeling mighty bad. Jim Norton was doing a heap of thinking as he stood there holding his horse's reins.

"No use hangin' around moonin' about it, boys," Norton finally said. "You all better get workin'. I'll ride to town later and see what I can do for Hank."

The men rode away. With spring roundup coming soon there was a lot of work to be done and they all knew their jobs. Norton tied his horse to a post and headed for the bunkhouse. It seemed like Doyle had been trying to tell him something when he asked the foreman to bring him a clean shirt.

"That shirt he's wearin' is clean," muttered Norton. "He was wearin' a different one just yesterday."

Norton found the saddle-bag under Doyle's bunk and looked through it. He gasped as he drew out a thick roll of bills. The foreman sat on the bunk and slowly counted the money.

"Four thousand seven hundred dollars," he said as he finished counting. "And they claim five thousand was stole from the saloon last night! Looks like I better go talk to the boss about this."

The foreman stuck the roll of money into a pocket of his levis and walked up to the ranchhouse. Old Matt Jefferson was sitting on the porch like he always was these mornings, since he had hurt his left leg in a fall from his horse.

"Took yuh long enough to come up here and tell me what's goin' on," snapped the ranch owner. "I seen that posse ridin' away with Hank Doyle. What happened?"

JIM NORTON told his boss all he knew. Jefferson listened quietly until the foreman had finished and produced the roll of bills.

"Doyle showed me a letter he got from a lawyer in Coyoteville saying his uncle had left him a legacy," Jefferson said then. "That's why Hank went to town yesterday. He aimed to see that lawyer."

"Reckon he did see him," said Norton thoughtfully. "What do yuh know about Sam Richmond and Buck Harvey, Boss?"

"A couple of no-goods!" snorted Jefferson. "Richmond has a two-bit spread over east that don't amount to shucks. Harvey is usually hangin' around with Thorn Nash and the rest of the saloon crowd."

"I'm ridin' into town and turn that money I found in Hank's saddle-bag over to the law," Norton said. "But I aim to ask a few hombres some questions first off."

"Yuh usually know what yuh're doin', Jim." The ranch owner smiled. "I like Hank Doyle. Can't believe he'd pull such a fool trick as that robbery."

"Me neither," said Norton, as he went down the porch steps.

He got his horse, swung into saddle, and rode away. Half an hour later he dismounted at the hitching-rail in front of the Owl Head Saloon. It was a right warm day for early spring and the town was mighty quiet.

Thorn Nash stepped out of the saloon with "Blackie" Grew close behind him. The saloon owner was a big, square-faced man with hard dark eyes. Blackie Grew always reminded Norton of a snake dressed up like an undertaker.

"Morning, gents," Norton said, as he fastened his reins to the pole. "Heard Hank Doyle lost a thousand dollars in a poker game here last night."

"It was only three—" Grew said, then broke off short like he had bitten his tongue. "Doyle didn't play any poker here last night. He wasn't near the saloon till he came in with a gun in his hand and held us up and robbed us."

"Heard that, too," said Norton. "Sometimes a feller hears so many things he don't rightly

know what to believe." The foreman smiled and touched the roll of bills in his pocket. "I found close to five thousand dollars in Doyle's saddle-bag out at the ranch though. I'm turnin' the money over to the sheriff now."

The saloon owner looked at the gambler, and they both seemed right pleased about something. Norton didn't act like he noticed the look that had passed between the two men.

"I aim to talk to Lawyer Hawkins first though," Norton said. "Ain't right for Doyle not to have somebody defendin' him all legal-like."

"Afraid yuh can't talk to Hawkins," said Nash. "He left town last night. Said he was goin' East on a two-months' vacation—and there ain't another lawyer in town."

"Too bad," muttered Norton. "In that case I reckon Hank will just have to get along as best he can."

"We'll go with yuh when yuh see the sheriff," said the saloon owner. "That five thousand belongs to me and I want it."

Jim Norton did not argue about it any as the two men walked down the street to the sheriff's office which was in the front part of the jail. They found Sheriff Lang sitting at his desk. Norton produced the roll of bills and turned it over to the sheriff.

"That's my money, Sheriff," said Thorn Nash. "The five thousand that Hank Doyle stole from the saloon last night."

"Happens yuh're wrong about that, Nash," drawled Norton. "That money belongs to Doyle. He inherited it when an uncle of his died. That lawyer feller turned the money over to Hank in cash yesterday. Guess Doyle was feelin' right good about it, so he got in a poker game at the saloon and lost three hundred dollars without it worryin' him none."

"That's a lie!" snapped the saloon owner. "Doyle didn't play poker in the saloon last night."

. . "Oh, yes, he did," said Norton, lying fast as a horse can trot. "He sat in a game with you and Grew and Sam Richmond and Buck Harvey in that back room in the saloon. I happened to go down the alley and saw yuh all there through the window. 'Sides, Richmond admitted it when I asked him about it this mornin' out at his spread."

"Why, the dirty doublecrossin'—" muttered Blackie Grew.

"Yuh see, Sheriff," said Norton, his hand on the butt of his gun. "Grew always did talk too much. Just a little while ago I said to him out in front of the saloon that I'd heard Hank had lost a thousand dollars in a poker game. Grew started to say it was only three hundred, then shut up."

THE sheriff shook his head, still puzzled. "But why should these men lie and try to frame Doyle?" he demanded. "If they did do it."

"Because they wanted that five thousand that Doyle inherited," said Norton. "It was Doyle's word against theirs. The lawyer that turned the money over to Hank has left town. Reckon if I hadn't taken a hand in this you'd have had to believe Hank was guilty and turn the money over to Nash and his crew. Ain't that so?"

"And we're still goin' to have that money!" Thorn Nash reached out and grabbed up the roll of bills off the desk with his left hand. "Don't try to stop us from takin' it!" He drew his gun.

Norton fired as he saw that the saloon owner was about to shoot the sheriff. Grew almost tried to shoot, but the gun dropped from his hand as Norton put a bullet in his arm.

"No doubt now that these two are guilty," the sheriff said grimly. "You was plumb smart, Norton."

"Un-huh." The foreman looked at the sheriff. "And now would yuh mind releasin' the prisoner, Sheriff? Me and Hank's got to get back to the ranch. There's a lot of work to be done today."

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Next Issue: JOHNNY WAGONWHEELS, Novelet by TOM GUNN

■

Tired Kidneys Often Bring Sleepless Nights

Doctors say your kidneys contain 15 miles of tiny tubes or filters which help to purify the blood and keep you healthy. When they get tired and don't work right in the daytime, many people have to get up nights. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder. Don't neglect this condition and lose valuable, restful sleep.

When disorder of kidney function permits poisonous matter to remain in your blood, it may also cause nagging backache, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, used successfully by millions for over 40 years. They give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills.

(Adv.)

The Circle 7 Crime

By TOM GUNN

A sneaking murder attempt via a Gila monster in a waddy's bunk sends Sheriff Blue Steele and Deputy Shorty Watts sky-hootin' to clean up a sidewinder counterfeit gang!

CHAPTER I

Mystery Monster

OLD Arizona had few laws. The Territorial Legislature was made up of rugged, direct men who believed that good government, like a good horse, needed only a light rein.

The code of statutes on the desk of the Sheriff of Painted Post therefore wasn't any thicker than a man-sized beefsteak. It was a tribute to Sheriff Blue Steele that every page of it was well-thumbed.

But when Steele could find no prescribed punishment to fit a crime, he proceeded according to his own methods, with the vigorous but often mystified aid of his loyal little red-headed deputy, "Shorty" Watts.

What was perhaps the most baffling case to occur in Indian County had its beginning one blustery, raw day in February when a Circle 7 cowpuncher named Pete Crowley, but better known as "Crawly Pete," rode into Painted Post with the ugly head of a Gila monster dangling from his bloody hand.

SHERIFF BLUE STEELE

Crawly Pete was not of a glamorous type of cowboy. He looked more like a sheep-herder. He was rattle-boned, scraggly and awkward, and it was a well-known fact that he never threw away his money on soap. His first act on entering that haven of refuge, the Painted Post Saloon, was to lurch to the bar and motion for a drink with his good hand.

He downed it at a gulp.

"I'm done for, boys!" he groaned then. "It's been four-five hours since I got bit and I've knowed men to die in half that time from a rattler bite!"

"Puddle-duddle!" scoffed Doc Crabtree as he sterilized a lance by stropping it on his sleeve. "Gila monsters ain't venomous, like rattlesnakes!"

"But look, Pete's arm is swole up clean to the shoulder!" gabbled "Thimble Jack," the bartender.

"Sure! Infection. Same as if he'd been pecked by a buzzard."

"You mean I'll get well?" bleated Crawly Pete. "How long'll it take?"

Doc Crabtree got a good grip on Pete's arm and laid it on the bar.

"What hand do yuh shave with?" he asked.

"That one. The right one."

"Then yuh'll have whiskers about six inches long before yuh can swing a rope for Circle Seven again, my lad."

CRAWLY PETE, signaling for another drink, didn't see the glittering scalpel poised over the fleshy part of his thumb, where the lifeless head of the loathsome lizard clung. He winced as the instrument made a deep, clean incision. It was not a pretty sight as Doc Crabtree, with a deft twist, freed the

A COMPLETE PAINTED POST NOVELET

Steele hit saddle and spurted toward the tent, dragging Quiggle

blunt, yellow fangs and the Gila monster's head thumped to the floor.

Blue Steele was a silent onlooker to Crawly Pete's ordeal.

When the surgical details were complete and the puncher's hand was swathed in bandage, the sheriff's thoughts became plain in his first question.

"Desert reptiles, includin' Gila monsters, den up in the cold months," he remarked. "Didn't yuh pick an unusual season to get yoreself bit, Pete?"

"I picked a unusual place to get it," the ranny said.

"Where'd it happen?" chirped Shorty.

"In bed," was the solemn answer. "Yessir, along toward sunup this mornin' I was havin' me a mighty pleasant dream. I dreamed I was rakin' in a big poker pot. Reckon I sort of made a motion. I came to all of a sudden, to find I was grabbin' onto somethin' alongside of me, under the blankets, there in the Circle Seven bunkhouse. That's how it happened. I got fanged before I knowed what it was."

"Creation!" gasped Shorty. "How'd it get there?"

"And why didn't the rest of the Circle Seven outfit rouse out and help yuh?" Thimble Jack demanded.

The puncher's answer created a stir of fresh surprise.

"I was alone! Not a soul there in the bunkhouse but me—and that goldurned bull-lizard!"

"Old Man Bonsall, the new Circle Seven boss," queried Steele. "Where was he?"

"I went to the ranchhouse for help. It was empty. Nobody around the spread but Frenchy the cook. He whacked the thing off with a butcher knife, then when it didn't let go he ran and hid hisself, thinking he had the deeties, same as the time he went on a vanilly extract spree and seen pink elephants. So then I saddled up and dingled here to see the Doc. That's the whole story, boys."

He gestured at Thimble Jack for another drink and got it.

Ten minutes later Steele and Shorty hit the trail for Circle 7.

The sheriff, lean, bronzed and somber, was a statue of silence as he rode southward through catclaw and creosote. Shorty, aboard his chunky pinto, was hard put as usual to keep pace with the famous steel-dust gelding, fastest horse on the Arizona border. It rankled the little deputy to straggle, because he was bubbling over with questions.

Not until they reached a long, slow rise where the desert lifted to a piñon ridge did he draw abreast of Steele.

"Just how does this here affair concern us, Sheriff?" he piped. "All Pete's outfit done was to vamoose somewheres without notifyin' him."

"And plant a bitin' lizard in his bed."

"Is that a crime in the law books?"

"Not specifically. Unless proved as an act intended to do bodily harm."

"Huh, beddin' down with Crawly Pete was as apt to bodily harm the Gila monster as that high-smellin' cowhand! About a toss-up, anyhow. I'd about as soon sleep with one as the other."

"Pete has his drawbacks. But he's been in these parts a plenty long time and the worst that's ever been said about him is that he takes a bath sort of infrequent."

"Yuh figger, then, that there's somethin' more behind it than just a lowdown practical joke?"

"It's our job to find out, *segundo.*"

It was a long ride to Circle 7, over rough country. The spread hugged the Mexican boundary. It lay on a high, dry plateau, broken by barren mountains. Circle 7 had passed through a succession of ownerships. It was a bad luck ranch where many a stockman had gone broke.

Old Man Bonsall was the latest of these. He was a hard-driving, hot-tempered Texan, surly and unsociable, but with a reputation for paying spot cash and never questioning the price in any transaction. That trait won him toleration despite his manners, which most Indian County folks laid to worry over Circle 7 losses.

It was late afternoon when Steele and Shorty came onto the ranch. They paused first at a corral watering trough, where the gelding and pinto muzzled a thin scum of ice.

THERE were Circle 7 horses in the corral. Shorty, scanning them expertly, detected recent sweaty saddle marks on six of them.

"Looks like the outfit is back home," he surmised.

Steele nodded. "Since around noon," he said with the calm assurance of having witnessed their return.

At Shorty's wondering exclamation, Steele smiled thinly and pointed to the glaze of ice in the watering trough. Then Shorty remembered that puddles they had crossed along the trail had been frozen solid throughout this thawless winter day.

With that the lawmen reined toward the clutter of frame and adobe buildings across the windswept ranch yard. Smoke ribboned

out of the cook shack stove-pipe. They made for there.

The door grated open as Steele sang out a "Hullo!" Framed in the opening stood the man they most of all wanted to see—Bonsall.

The Circle 7 boss was thick-set, middle-aged, with close-cropped iron-gray hair, dark piercing eyes and a thin line of mustache that turned down at the ends, emphasizing the glumness of the hard, unsmiling face. He wore a red-checkered flannel shirt that hugged his burly shoulders snugly.

Bonsall grunted a response to their greeting.

"Come and set," he invited in a listless, unenthusiastic voice. "Chow's on."

DEPUTY SHORTY WATTS

"Figgered we was too late for dinner and too early for supper." Shorty grinned.

"Around here," said Bonsall, "we eat when I'm hungry."

He turned back inside, partly closing the door behind him, leaving his callers to enter or not, as they chose.

He was seated at the head of the long table when they entered, and did not look up from his food. There were five others, besides the cook. In various tones they uttered a greeting to the sheriff and Shorty, then went on eating.

The little deputy slid to a place on a bench and started reaching hungrily. Steele crossed the low-raftered room to the big, hot range, turning his back to it and warming his hands behind him, feet wide apart, twin Colts snugged against his narrow hips on a buscadero belt, bright with cartridges. Without seeming officious, although his badge of office shone on the front of his calfskin vest, his rock-gray eyes traveled from one man to another who surrounded the table.

If Bonsall was eager for the sheriff to state the cause of his errand, he showed no sign of it.

He devoted his attention to his food with a completeness that was almost deliberate rudeness.

The man at his right was less unconcerned. Big Jim Powers pushed his plate from him, got up, took his hat from a peg and slapped it on his head. He watched Steele furtively as he busied himself with a cigarette. As he got to his feet it was seen that he wore a six-gun.

The others didn't matter. There was a handsome youngster, "Curly" Quiggle, who had bragged himself out of a job on the T Bar T. There was a man known as Colfax, small and wiry, an expert roper; "Red" Darnell and a Mexican, Juan Ligarto, who, on account of a livid knife scar on one cheek, seemed always to be smiling.

"Frenchy," the cook, was the cordial one of the lot. He was a quick, small man with an immense red nose, shoe-button eyes and a mustache that hid his mouth. He bustled around the stove in a flour-sack apron, warming up food and poking fuel into the already roaring fire.

"Zis wood, she got no heat in her, same as Arizona sunshine today," babbled Frenchy as he shook a skilletful of fried potatoes. "Seddown, *M'sieu* Sheriff, seddown. Hot coffee, yas? It is best for a man to warm heemself from ze inside out."

BIG Jim Powers touched off his cigarette It seemed to be a fuse to his explosive temper. He flung down the match.

"All right, Steele, spring it!" he rasped.

Shorty scowled around at him appealingly.

"Good grief, Jim, can't yuh hold up the fire works till I get fed?" he implored.

Colfax laughed. The Mexican's perpetual smile grew into a soft snicker. Even on Steele's face faint amusement hovered for an instant. Eating to Shorty was the important thing, always.

"You told 'em about Crawly, Frenchy?" Steele inquired.

The cook evidently had, but before he could say so Old Man Bonsall spoke without lifting his eyes from his plate.

"I hope yuh didn't come to Circle Seven to stir up trouble over a no-account like Crowley! For the past two months since I fired him, he's been hangin' around ridin' chuckline. Two months, yuh hear? There's a limit to boardin' a bum!"

Shorty gaped at him open-mouthed.

"So it was you that crammed that Gila monster in Crawly's bed!" he exploded.

"Shore," Bonsall promptly admitted.

Steele lifted to his lips a cup of steaming coffee the cook had poured.

"Bonsall," he drawled in a bored tone, "yuh're lyin'."

CHAPTER II

In the Open

BONSALL sprang to his feet, his knees jarring the table and sending filled dishes sloshing. Those were fighting words for any Texan, good or bad. He rushed at Steele.

Darnell and Ligarto were on that side of the table, nearest the stove. They dived under the table to get from between the two men. In doing so, they toppled the bench. Bonsall fell headlong over it. His hands went out instinctively to break his fall. They came down on the cherry-red stove. There was an audible hiss of searing tissue.

He thrust himself away from it without so much as a sound of pain. He gazed for a moment at his palms. The flesh was cooked frightfully. The cook, with quick presence of mind, flung a scoop of flour on them.

"*Sacre,* it is terrible!" moaned Frenchy.

Bonsall moved his fingers, as though to close his fists, which was impossible with the quick swelling.

He returned to his seat and settled down heavily, resting elbows on his knees and still staring at his puffed and misshapen hands.

"Reckon we'll have to settle this later, Steele," he said evenly.

"Not by a dang sight!" shouted Big Jim Powers. "We'll settle it now!"

His six-gun was out and leveled across the table at the sheriff who had not yet stirred from his tracks.

"Clear out, Steele!" bellowed the red-faced Powers. "Clear out while there's daylight to travel by! Circle Seven don't need yuh and don't want yuh! Now skedaddle and if yuh make a move for them Colts I'll burn yuh!"

Shorty was scrooched down on the bench, almost under Powers' gun. His mouth was full and he was still chewing but he couldn't swallow in that position. Colfax and Quiggle had eased themselves off the bench and were making toward the door when the little deputy suddenly toppled over backward.

He hit the floor on his shoulders. His feet shot up, cracking against Powers' elbow. The six-gun boomed as it flew out of Powers' hand. It was a startling act of agility that nobody but Shorty would ever have attempted.

The six-gun landed on the table. Powers dived for it as Shorty scrambled up. Powers grabbed the gun. Shorty, still gripping a fork, stabbed down. Powers howled and let go, with the fork tines stuck deep in the back of his hand, blood spurting as he clutched it to him.

Colfax was at the door, hand on the latch, but he was too spellbound to open it.

"I've seen fancy plays in my time, but this tops 'em all!" he breathed to young Quiggle in a small, awed voice. "Look at that man Steele! He hasn't wiggled a finger yet."

"When he does, hombre, look out," Quiggle whispered hoarsely. "I remember one time when—"

Steele took another swallow of coffee.

"In every crowd there's a dunderhead that'll spill the beans," he remarked.

"What yuh drivin' at?" snarled Big Jim as he bound a bandanna around his hurt hand.

"Yuh showed yuh was mighty anxious to get me away from here. Why?"

"Because I hate yore insides, Steele!"

Shorty made a final grab at a piece of unfinished steak and as he straightened his eyes widened with alarm.

"Behind yuh, Sheriff!" he cried sharply.

Steele whirled. Frenchy had just slipped a long butcher knife from a rack behind the stove. He held it poised, shoulder-high. His face went sheepish as he slowly lowered it.

"*Pardone, M'sieu* Sheriff," he smirked. "I think only to whittle kindling for the morning. By Joe, it is ze truth!"

It was a lie. Frenchy's eyes told that as they flicked to Bonsall apologetically.

Steele plucked a straight-grained length of pine from the woodbox and thrust it into the cook's hand.

"All right, then, Frenchy," he said, "start whittlin'. And don't stop whittlin', savvy?"

Frenchy shrugged and began industriously to peel off shavings. Colfax drew his hand slowly from the door latch and faced Steele.

"Excuse me for sayin' so, Sheriff," he ventured, "but don't yuh figger we sort of got off on the wrong foot here, all of us? After all, like the boss says, there's nothin' so awful serious about a little practical joke somebody played on Crowley, is there?"

"Little joke, huh?" piped Shorty. "Did yuh ever get bit by a Gila monster, hombre?"

"I never even seen a Gila monster," declared Colfax. "That's one varmint we ain't got up in Wyomin' where I came from."

STEELE had pursued his usual method of letting others do most of the talking. His sharp gray eyes now went to young Quiggle, whom he knew better than any of the others.

"And what've you got to say, Curly?" he asked casually.

The young puncher ran a hand through his hair thoughtfully.

"Come to think of it, Sheriff," he declared, "I don't recollect yuh even mentionin' a Gila monster. Fact is, yuh ain't even told us why yuh're here!"

"Just a sociable call," grunted Red Darnell, dusting off his knees. "Mebbe."

Shorty gulped his hunk of meat.

"Now everybody's said his little piece except Ligarto, here, Sheriff."

The Mexican looked confused, which was

quite a feat for one who seemed always to be smiling. He ran a tongue inside his scarred cheek and started speaking rapidly.

"My cozzin Rubio in Sonora get heemself bit wan time by wot you call Gila mawnster. Rubio, heem sick wan long time and go out of hees *cabeza.*"

"Aw, shut up!" growled Big Jim Powers. "If I've heard that yarn once, I've heard it a dozen times!"

There was quiet triumph in the smile that Steele turned on the grumbling Powers.

"Exactly, Jim," he said, "and I reckon that was what gave yuh the idea."

"What idea?" barked Powers.

"Of a handy way to get rid of Pete Crowley. Without downright murderin' him. Nice yuh've got yore hat on, Jim. Because we're goin' for a ride."

It was almost sundown when Steele and Shorty with their prisoner left the Circle 7 corral and jogged north along the rough and winding trail that the lawmen had covered hardly an hour before. Big Jim Powers was in a rage.

"There's just one thing lower'n a man that fights with a knife! That's a man that fights with a fork! Another thing, dang yuh, Steele yuh can't arrest a man on this flimsy trumped-up charge!"

"That's right, Jim," Steele agreed amiably.

"Then what for yuh drag-haulin' me up to Painted Post?"

"We're not goin' to Painted Post, Jim, not now."

"Then where in all creation are we goin'?"

"For a ride, like I told yuh there at the cook shack."

Powers blasted an oath, Shorty lifted his collar and hunched down into it.

"I don't savvy either, Sheriff," he complained. "It ain't what I call salubrious weather for jackassin' around aimless-like."

They were out of sight of Circle 7 now and as they dipped into a shallow gully the sheriff reined abruptly back on a route that would carry them past the Bonsall spread, then into the rolling country to the south.

"Lost yore nerve, huh?" sneered Powers. "Headin' back?"

"Quit guessin', Jim," Steele admonished mockingly. "Don't strain that feeble intellect of yores. Just you ride, between the two of us, and keep yore hands off the reins. Knot 'em over yore saddle-horn."

"No, I'll be jiggered if I will!"

Shorty jabbed the prisoner in the ribs with the six-gun he had taken from him.

"Yuh heard what the sheriff said," he warned. "Hands in yore pockets, knothead." Then he chirped brightly to Steele: "I savvy now, Sheriff! Mebbe Jim's hoss will pick out the route it traveled last night, huh?"

"And many a night before. That's my guess, *segundo.*"

Thus Pete Crowley and his Gila monster bite was the small beginning that was leading them into matters of more serious import. If Steele's ruse worked, they would learn what mysterious mission drew Bonsall and his sinister outfit forth at an hour when honest ranchers slept.

Riding slowly, they hair-pinned so close to the ranch that they could scent the wood smoke from the cook shack and glimpse a lighted window. For it was dark now. The air was so dry and clean and cold that it stung the nostrils. The searching wind plucked at them maliciously. The desert stars glinted like polished gems.

There was wild, lonely beauty in a night like this, but no comfort. The shrill lament of a marauding coyote lifted from a rise beyond the Circle 7 meadows. They passed through an open gate and the horses' hoofs thudded on loose planking that bridged a ditch. A killdeer rose with its eerie cry from a patch of wet ground.

POWERS had fallen silent. But he spoke again now, no longer blustering, but with a note of anxiety.

"What did Crawly blabber to yuh, Steele?"

"Did he know anything to blabber?"

"He could lie to beat all thunderation, couldn't he?"

"What about?"

"The rest of us spendin' a night away from the ranch now and then."

"Why didn't Crowley join the rest of yuh?"

"There was blamed good reasons!"

"Was that why Bonsall fired him?"

"In a way, I reckon, it was."

"Then Bonsall had somethin' to hide—is that it?"

"I ain't sayin'!"

"Then yuh're hidin' somethin' too, Jim. Why don't yuh jar loose with it and save yoreself a heap of trouble?"

For an uncertain interval, it seemed that the big puncher was going to oblige. Then his blind and overwhelming hatred of Steele surged out of him again.

"I ain't talkin' no more, yuh hear?" he jangled. "Yuh always twist the talk around and get a man mixed up! I hate smart-alecks!"

"I hate Gila monsters," Shorty put in. "I don't savvy how yuh got up nerve to handle one, Jim. 'Course I reckon yuh did, even if Bonsall says he did."

"There's nothin' to it," declared Steele, "in the winter when they're cold and dormant. No more dangerous than horned toads, not till they're warmed up."

"How about that, Jim?" Shorty asked sociably. "Or mebbe somebody helped yuh. Mighta knowed yuh didn't have the nerve to grab onto one yoreownself."

"That's a lie!" yawped Powers. "I ain't scared of anything that jumps, wiggles or crawls, and never was!"

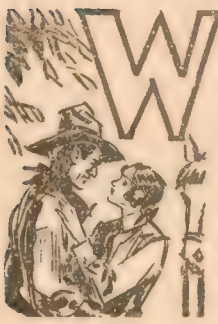
As Steele and Shorty baited the confused, slow-thinking puncher, the horse under him

jogged steadily southward. The plan that depended on an animal's obedience to habit was working.

But where would this night trail lead them? In what close-lipped villainy had the Circle 7 outfit been engaged?

CHAPTER III

Risk in the Dark



WRAPPED in thoughtful silence as they moved slowly through the deepening darkness, Steele reviewed the known facts.

Bonsall's ranch was not a paying proposition, yet he always had ready money. How did he make it?

Rustling? No, few cattle were seen on Circle 7, and the brand's shipments were always small. Certainly not heavy enough to justify the regular employment of six riders.

Robbery, looting, raids? No, for along the American side of the Border, for miles from Circle 7, there was nobody to rob, no human habitations to loot and nothing of value to raid.

Border smuggling? Not likely. What contraband would be profitable—guns, ammunition, precious gems, precious metals, forbidden drugs? If Bonsall were trafficking in any of these, some evidence would long since have developed in this thinly-settled region where such activities would have become conspicuous.

It was just as certain that the outfit's night-riding was not for the purpose of social diversion. Except for a few ranches in the Mexican State of Sonora, there was not a town except Painted Post in saddle distance of Circle 7.

Yet Old Man Bonsall prospered. And Steele was convinced that these night rides to the south held the clue to his cash-on-the-nail reputation.

Steele's thoughts were interrupted by a sullen demand from Powers.

"Let's stop. I got to light."

"What for?" Shorty inquired bluntly.

"My hand come unwrapped and it's about froze, if yuh got to know! I just now dropped the bandanna!"

He swung down from saddle as he finished speaking. Steele kneed the gelding in close.

"Take a look back, *segundo*," he ordered. "Jim's forked hand is bare, all right."

"But not empty!" Powers snarled, making a swift, swinging movement. His horse reared and uttered a stricken, gurgling sound.

Steele threw himself down and knocked Powers to the ground. But his precaution came too late. In a single, cold-blooded, brutal slash, Big Jim Powers had knifed the throat of his horse. Struggling feebly, it dropped to its knees, the dark flow drenching its breast.

Powers picked himself up, throwing away the knife that he had carried concealed in his coat pocket.

Shorty forgot about the dropped bandanna. He bounced from leather and hurled himself at Powers. But Steele thrust himself between them.

"Keep yore head, *segundo!*" he warned.

"But, Sheriff, a hyena like him ain't fit to live! That was the cruelest thing I ever seen a man do!"

"I reckon Steele ain't the only smart hombre," sneered Powers. "It means this critter has led yuh as far as it's goin' to!"

The Circle 7 horse, with an expiring sigh, keeled over on its side and threshed in its death throes. Big Jim Powers laughed.

When Shorty subsided, Steele picked up and pocketed the knife with which the big, brutal Powers had committed his callous act.

"Looks like our night's work is over," the little deputy said woefully. "All I ask, Sheriff, is two-three minutes alone with Big Jim before we turn him loose."

"That'll suit me fine!" growled the prisoner.

"But we're not turnin' him loose, *segundo*," Steele said.

"Migosh, Sheriff, what's the use of totin' him around?"

"Get the hobbles out of yore saddle-bags."

"Creation, yuh figger to hobble a dead hoss?"

"I figger to hobble Jim to a dead hoss."

Powers ripped out a curse.

"And leave me out here to freeze? Yuh can't do that! It—it ain't human! Even a Apache wouldn't do that!"

Powers' fearful protest was choked off as a thick leather hobble was buckled tightly around his neck. The other circlet, linked to the first with a short chain, was drawn shut on a still-quivering hind leg of the Circle 7 horse. Then Shorty cut its macarty rope and bound Powers' hand behind him, taking savage pleasure in doing a thorough job of it.

"Crawl against the belly of the animal yuh killed," Steele told the helpless puncher. "It'll keep yuh halfway warm. For an hour or so."

THEN Steele and Shorty mounted and rode. They headed back toward the Circle 7. The little deputy hunched his shoulders against the biting wind, grumbled at the discomfort, then ended with a shivery laugh.

"I plumb hope the outfit'll be sleepin' sound after their night out, huh, Sheriff?"

"Right, *segundo*. This bein' our first hoss-stealing expedition."

They reached the Circle 7 corral uneventfully. Steele swung down and crawled through the gate bars, dragging a lariat loop. He disturbed the cavvy as little as possible, but even so the commotion of their hoofs flung a warning through the premises. The cook shack and ranchhouse were dark, but lamplight showed from a bunkhouse window.

Steele caught up a horse and started for the gate. Shorty dropped the two top gate bars. As the sheriff stepped out, the bunkhouse door was flung open.

Framed in the opening stood Red Darnell.

"Hullo, out there!" he called out, craning into the wall of darkness.

"Quick, Sheriff, make a Injun halter with that rope and let's make tracks!"

As he spoke, Shorty was putting the gate bars back in place. Steele thrust him aside and lowered them again. He thrust his throw rope in Shorty's hand. Leaving the little deputy holding the captured horse, he vanished back inside the corral.

In the bunkhouse door, Ligarto crowded beside Darnell.

"It is the wind you hear, yes, no?" said the Mexican. Steele and Shorty could hear his voice plainly across the ranch yard.

"Wind, my eye!" Darnell sang out. "Somebody's out there with the cavvy! I'm takin' a look-see!"

Grabbing hat and coat, he started. As he left the doorway, a storm of hoofs swept from the open corral. All at once Steele was at Shorty's side.

"Now's our chance, *segundo!*" he said hurriedly. "Ride!"

Men were pouring from the bunkhouse as the two riders rounded the corral with the borrowed Circle 7 horse, streaked out across the meadow pasture and spurred southward.

"Migosh, that was a close call!" croaked Shorty. "But I reckon we're safe now! They can't round up them loose hosses till daylight! Even then, they'll figger the one we got is astray, huh, Sheriff?"

"That depends on our luck—and Red Darnell's."

But there was no pursuit and they found Big Jim Powers as they had left him. In a few minutes, after removing the hobbles, they had the saddle and trappings off the dead horse and on the other. Then they had Powers riding again, but this time with his hands bound behind him.

"My hand feels like a house afire!" the puncher complained.

"Might turn out to be worse'n a Gila bite," Shorty said cheerfully. "That fork, it'd been in a lot of things before you got stuck with it."

"It's swelled up somethin' awful!"

"Mebbe yuh're catchin' fried potato blood poison!"

"I need a doctor!" wailed Powers. "Besides which, this hoss ain't leadin' yuh right! It's the truth, I swear it, Steele!"

"Yuh want to go to Painted Post, then, is that it?"

"Yes, yes! I shore do!"

"Then here's yore chance, Jim. What's Bonsall's game? Tell us and we'll have yuh to Doc Crabtree before mornin'."

Powers thought it over at length.

"Talk myself out of the softest job I ever had?" he finally said. "No, I won't do it! Danged if I will!"

"Then yuh admit it's something lawless?"

"I didn't say so, did I?" flared Powers.

"Ranchin' is just a side line at Circle Seven —we know that much," asserted Shorty. "A sort of cover-up. I bet Curly Quiggle would tell us."

"That satchel-lip?" sneered Powers. "Yuh couldn't believe him on a stack of mail-order catalogues!"

Again they had the lunk-headed Big Jim talking faster than he could think, and might have learned something important. But just then a sound ahead halted the talk.

The sound was a bark. At first it sounded like the thin, quavering yelp of a coyote. But that sound the lawmen knew too well.

"Creation!" gasped Shorty. "A dog!"

"Nothin' but a Mexican woodcutters' camp on a pin oak flat in yonder canyon," Powers explained hastily.

"Yeah?" Shorty sniffed suspiciously. "Long ways from anywhere to cut and haul wood!"

"They make charcoal, yuh half-built ignoramus, like is used all over Mexico!" snapped Powers.

"But we're still on the Arizona side."

"Well, who'd start a fuss over a few oak stumps? Unless it's a pifflin' pair like you and Steele!"

"Suppose we stop and warm up," suggested Steele. "And have a look at that hand of yores."

POWERS shrugged. The dog set up an excited clamor as they neared the camp. Steele called out a greeting. A lantern blinked on, and a tent took ghostly form in the darkness.

"*Adelante,*" came a sleepy voice. "Come in."

Two Mexicans blinked and sat up in their blankets.

"We have a man with a hurt hand," Steele told them in Spanish.

Shorty freed Powers' hands and shoved him into the tent.

Steele's rock-hard eyes were busy in that instant. They went from the faces of the Mexican woodcutters to Powers and back again. If he expected to detect any light of recognition, he was doomed to disappointment. The woodcutters stared blankly. Powers' only concern was his hand. He thrust it toward the lighted lantern.

Steele's pulse leaped with the elation of a discovery. Powers' fingers were smudged darkly. Across a shoulder of his leather jacket was another streak. Steele rubbed a finger across it and it came away with the gritty black of—charcoal!

This aroused another half-forgotten observation. At the Circle 7 cook shack, as Steele had studied Bonsall's outfit, he had noticed dark smudges on the hands and clothing of several of those seated around the long table. At the

time he had only wondered vaguely. But now that gave him something to think about.

"Been here before, haven't yuh, Jim?" he drawled softly.

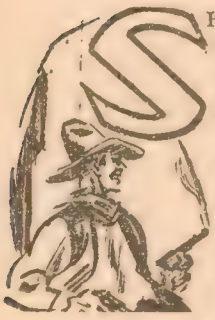
The big puncher swallowed hard. His puffed, punctured hand was within a foot of the lantern that set on an up-ended box. With a quick, back-handed blow he knocked the lantern to the ground and it went out.

In the next instant Steele staggered back with the force of a body blow. Shorty blurted a hurt sound and tumbled backward over a guy rope.

Recovering himself, Steele was outside in time to hear the Circle 7 horse in a spurting, scrambling getaway.

CHAPTER IV

Dobe Dollars



SHORTY hit leather and roweled the pinto in hurried pursuit, but Steele checked and turned him with a sharp command.

The little deputy was sputteringly indignant.

"Creation, Sheriff, after all the trouble we had with that polecat yuh aim to let him escape scot-free?"

"We know where to find him, *segundo*."

"At Circle Seven?"

"Yuh see that hand? Jim's in trouble with a bad case of blood poisonin'. Right now he's makin' a beeline for Painted Post. For Doc Crabtree."

"Then what'll we do now?"

"Wait for daylight. In the meantime, keep a close eye on the hosses. And the other on our woodcuttin' friends."

"I don't figger these simple-minded *peons* is in cahoots with Bonsall. I'd say we're on a blind trail. This night's work ain't accomplished a danged thing!"

Inside the tent, one of the woodcutters was groping for the fallen lantern. Fumbling in the dark, he upset the up-ended box that it had rested on. As it overturned there came a clink of metal. One of the woodcutters spoke in a cautious undertone and Steele caught the word "*dinero*"—money in Spanish.

He darted back inside and struck a light. The sulphur-headed match took hold with tantalizing slowness. As it sputtered to full flame, the sheriff saw one of the Mexicans hastily cramming a heavy canvas sack under his blankets.

Steele touched the match to the lantern wick and held it up. As the light grew he saw something round and shiny on the edge of the blankets. One of the Mexicans saw it, too, and grabbed for it. But Steele's boot was on it. He picked up the silver peso, turning it curiously in his fingers, a thoughtful pucker between his eyes.

"Charcoal-makers are rich," he mused.

One of the squatted men grinned up at him and replied in a bantering manner to match his own.

"*Eso es, senor,* that is right! Between us, you see, we have the one peso!"

Steele tossed it to him.

"And those under yuh—whose pesos are those?" he asked curtly.

The Mexican's manner changed to alarm.

"Poor men's savings!" he pleaded. "Surely senor would not—"

Shorty poked his head into the tent.

"The pore hombres figger we came to rob 'em, Sheriff," he said reproachfully.

Steele sat on the box, lantern between his knees, his keen, searching eyes boring two swarthy, anxious faces.

"Dirty hands do not always make clean money, *amigos,*" he said. "Or clean consciences, Who paid yuh this money and why?"

The pair exchanged uneasy glances. The badge on Steele's calfskin vest shone like a probing searchlight as they tried to evade his eyes.

"Let up on 'em, Sheriff," urged Shorty. "They don't know what yuh're drivin' at!"

The dog skulked in, sniffing at the visitors.

"More curious than its masters," Steele remarked.

"How so?"

"They haven't asked a single question about our peculiar actions, and Big Jim's."

"Mexicans are polite folks. A heap politer than we'd be if three men busted in on us in the middle of the night, got in a ruckus, knocked out the light, then squatted at our bedsides and asked a flock of personal questions!"

"A fine speech, *segundo*. Anything more?"

"You bet! Get these hombres mad at us, then where are we goin' to get any breakfast?"

Steele was untouched by this plaintive reminder. Just then one of the woodcutters decided to speak.

"Here is the truth, senor," he said. "This money is not ours."

Steele did not expect that answer.

"Yuh mean yuh owe it?"

"We owe nobody, senor."

"If the money is not yores, why hide it?"

The one who had done most of the talking shrugged sadly, dug into the blankets and shoved the heavy sack toward the sheriff.

"We hide nothing, senor. Go do what you will with this money."

What was there left to say? Steele, rolling a cigarette, twisted it shut and got to his feet. Only one thing was certain. These Mexicans were ten times smarter than Big Jim Powers. There was no tricking them into any guilty admission.

"*Vayamos, segundo,*" he ordered. "Let's go."

"B-but, Sheriff, what about—"

"Breakfast?" Steele breathed softly when they were outside. "Don't worry, *segundo*. We'll be back."

IN THE canyon a mile above the woodcutter's camp they built a small fire in a rocky crevice, protected from the wind, and there rested as best they could for the remainder of the long night.

They were in saddle again at daylight. Steele was determined to look over the charcoal camp. As they neared it, they saw the two Mexicans under a flopping shelter fly in front of the tent. They had a fire going in a crude, mud-sided stove.

The dog barked. Some vague instinct of danger warned Steele to rein toward a patch of undergrowth on the canyon slope. Quickly his suspicion was confirmed. Without the slightest warning a rifle cracked and a bullet whined perilously close to his head. But for the wind, that might have been a killing shot.

The lawmen plunged into cover before a second shot could come. They caught a fragmentary glimpse of the man who had fired on them from behind a rack of corded oak wood.

"Red Darnell!" gritted Shorty. "A dangerous customer, Sheriff! What'll we do? Coddle him like we did Jim Powers?"

Steele's answer was to whip out a Colt and crouch forward, seeking an opening in the brush that concealed them.

The riddle of Circle 7 hadn't been solved yet. There was no evidence on which to base an arrest. But by any code, a man had a right to defend himself when attacked.

"Something to sink our teeth into at last," gloated Shorty. "Even if it ain't breakfast!"

He tethered the horses and squirmed upslope until he reached a vantage point that overlooked the camp. Barely showing over the top of the racked wood he saw Darnell's hat, a peaked crown Stetson. He drew his .45, sighted coarsely and let go.

Bark flew from a chunk of oak a handspan to the left of the hat. But it didn't budge.

"Huh, and I fell for that old trick!" Shorty muttered. "Well, just for that, here goes!"

He sighted and fired again and the hat whirled and dropped with a .45 hole squarely through it. The rifle spoke again, the report mingling with the .45's echoes. Shorty's wide-brimmed JB flew off of his head. He flattened himself and grabbed it and stared angrily at a neat, round puncture in the crown.

Drifting downwind, he also smelled *frijoles* cooking. But with a manful effort he swept that from his mind.

"That man Darnell, he shore ain't no amachoor gunfighter!" he admitted grudgingly. "He missed the blazin' glory of my topknot about two inches! I better be careful!"

Then he let the hat roll across an open space below him. He rolled after it, six-gun clamped under his left arm. His five-feet-two lodged in a shallow depression behind a knoll of frost-browned bracken. There he stiffened to alertness, but still stretched flat. He saw a rifle barrel two yards to the right of Darnell's propped-up hat. It was moving, as though the sights had followed him in his dead-man flop downhill.

Shorty squinted and squeezed. At the leap of his .45 came a blurted cry. The rifle barrel dropped from sight.

Of course, that could be a trick, too. But the yell had been timed precisely with his shot. It sounded like genuine distress.

Shorty saw the sheriff in a swift, gliding run from the oaks to a newly-cut stump. Steele blazed three times with a Colt as he dropped behind it.

The two Mexicans ran out, waving a white rag on a stick. They were between Steele and the wood rack.

"*Por Dios, senor,* have mercy for the dead!" cried the talky one.

Shorty lifted his head and sniffed. There was an aroma that cheated victory of its grim satisfaction.

"Vamoose back to the *frijoles!*" he yowled at the woodcutters. "Dang the luck, they're burnin'!"

The excited Mexicans had exaggerated. Red Darnell was not dead. But he was thoroughly licked and out of the fight with two bullet-holes in him—one in the right shoulder, the other through his left forearm.

Steele plucked the surrendered flag and rolled it into a bandage.

"What powerful urge did yuh have to get here in such a hurry, buckaroo?" he asked.

Darnell's green eyes narrowed in his small, hard face.

"What you don't know would fill a big book, Steele!"

"It would have made a bigger book yesterday."

"So Powers talked, did he?"

"Hold out that arm."

DARNELL snatched the bandage.

"I'm able to handle my own troubles!" he rasped, holding one end of the twisted cloth in his teeth and wrapping it tightly around his bloody forearm. His bare brow beaded with agonized sweat. His shirt was soaked red from the shoulder wound.

"It's a doctor for you, Darnell, or yuh're done for," Steele told him.

With an agonized gasp, the puncher gave up his bandaging.

"Our set-up wasn't hurtin' anybody," he groaned. "Why in blazes did you horn into it, Steele?"

Steele pondered the words. He was still in the dark. He was sure now that whatever the Circle 7 was up to, the plot centered in this woodcutters' camp. Powers' bolt and Darnell's vicious attack proved that. The sheriff's resolve to search the premises increased.

But a search might be shortened with some

pain-wrung, revealing hint from Darnell.

Steele made another try.

"Did yuh know Bonsall before yuh came to Circle Seven?" he asked.

"We all worked together on the Texas border," was the answer. "All of us, that is, except Crawly Pete."

Shorty arrived noisily with the horses.

"They saved the beans, Sheriff!" he yipped. "Can't we take a little time out to eat?"

Darnell clammed up. It wasn't likely that he would talk again. His strength was going. Steele finished the bandaging. Then he and Shorty half-carried Darnell to the tent. A pot of *frijoles* was on the edge of the mud-walled stove. At a gesture from one of the Mexicans, Shorty grabbed a tin plate and dug into them.

He was lifting the first bite to his mouth when a yell came from the canyon rim.

Shorty flung a startled look. Three riders were charging down on the camp, fanning out as they came. He recognized them as Quiggle, Colfax and Ligarto. They had made a quick job of rounding up some of the scattered cavvy. Down they came with drawn guns.

"Get their hosses, boys!" Quiggle yelled. "Then we'll have 'em treed!"

CHAPTER V

Clean Money

DROPPING his untasted meal, Shorty raced for the gelding and the pinto. He had left them by the wood rack with Darnell's animal.

Colfax was spurring for them, swinging a long loop. Quiggle, at his left, fired two fast shots from a six-shooter, lifting dust a jump ahead of the little deputy.

Colfax made his throw. It was magnificent roping. The hondo dropped over the gelding's head and the long lariat snaked taut as Colfax swerved away.

Quiggle fired a third shot as Shorty dived behind the barrier of corded wood. He fired again as Shorty bobbed up, .45 in hand, for a try at Colfax, who was no more than sixty yards from him, his small, wiry body slanted low in saddle.

Ligarto was cutting in from the right now, getting to Shorty in back of the barricade of wood. Shorty dare not rise up again, only long enough to jerk down a tier of wood and let it tumble around him to protect him from Ligarto's flanking attack.

He was in a tight spot. In the nick of time Steele's Colts drummed a double volley and Ligarto wheeled off.

By now, Colfax was well away, with the sheriff's horse at his rope's end and Quiggle was slanting toward it. They were beyond six-gun distance from the wood rack. But they were bearing closer to the tent as the gelding pulled and fought the tightening noose. And Darnell's rifle, which might have reached them, was booted on Steele's saddle.

Steele's guns paused. Quiggle closed in against the gelding and seized the flying reins. The lariat slackened. Quiggle was slipping the loop from the gelding's neck when a Colt roared just once from the vicinity of the tent.

The young puncher arched back in saddle, teeth bared in a grimace of pain. He dropped the reins and clapped a hand to his side. Colfax tailed off, throw-rope slithering from its dally on his saddle-horn.

A freak thing happened then. Quiggle's arm was caught in the freed loop. He was jerked from saddle before Colfax could whirl and whip off the dallied lariat.

Steele ran recklessly out into the open and caught up the gelding. Also he scooped up the cast-off lariat. He hit saddle and spurted back toward the tent, dragging Quiggle.

The whole incredible action had taken place in a matter of seconds. Steele now had another prisoner. Colfax and Ligarto crossed the canyon and joined on the opposite rim, wrangling with each other furiously.

Shorty untangled himself from fallen wood and limped to the tent. He found some satisfaction in seeing that Curly Quiggle was battered worse than he was. Curly's bullet wound was a shallow one, grooving the ribs. But patches of hair and hide were missing after his rough ride over the ground at rope's end.

Steele knew Quiggle's weakness and was quick to attack that vulnerability.

"Yuh handled yore part mighty fine, kid," he praised. "Colfax and the Mex let yuh down."

"That's right!" blabbered the flattered Quiggle.

"And I bet yuh earned two dollars to their one, there at Circle Seven."

"I was smarter than the rest, shore. That's why I worked for a spell on Judge Bertram's T Bar T. So's Bonsall's outfit wouldn't look like a solid pack of strangers to the rest of Indian County. But," he added ruefully, "I didn't make no more money than the rest. We split six ways, after the boss took his big cut."

Steele hid the satisfaction that pulsed through him like a warming tonic. Handled right, this red-eared braggart would talk his head off.

"These woodcutters, how about their share, Curly?"

"These hombres only worked for Bonsall. Cookin' charcoal and bringin' dobe dollars up out of Mexico."

Darnell, on the verge of unconsciousness, glared up at his erstwhile comrade.

"Shut up, yuh loose-tongued fool! Can't yuh see what he's up to?"

"I know when to shut up and when to talk without yore say-so, Red," snapped Curly. "The

sheriff is onto the whole deal, and now that he's found this layout our game is finished."

"Yuh're correct, Curly," Steele said.

He started out of the tent and beckoned to Shorty.

"I'm havin' a quick look-see," he told his deputy. "Then we start for Painted Post with the cripples. Keep both eyes on 'em, *segundo.*"

"But them beans—"

"Go to 'em."

THE sheriff was back presently, mysteriously silent about what he had found. The Mexicans had hot food ready. Soon after sunrise they were headed north, riding slowly to accommodate the suffering Darnell. Steele got young Quiggle to talking again.

"Shore, six was too many," Curly confided. "I told Bonsall that. Glory, I could o' handled the whole blame thing myself! But the boss claimed we had to look like a cattle outfit. I coulda took care of Crawly Pete, too, but the boss didn't want to get into any trouble over a killin'. So Big Jim bugged up the deal. With that Gila monster business. He found the critter when we was diggin' one of the charcoal furnaces. That's how it come about."

"Charcoal furnaces?" Shorty pricked up his ears. "I had a notion charcoal was made in a kiln, not a furnace."

"The runt missed out on a few things while up to his ears in the beanpot," Quiggle said.

"Yeah?" flared the little redhead. "Well, I don't get tangled up in throw-ropes! Or with the law! And I know which hole in a shirt to poke my head through!"

Riding slowly, because of the weakening Darnell, it was late afternoon when they filed into Painted Post. The first thing that Shorty spotted was a Circle 7 horse at the hitch-rack in front of Thimble Jack's saloon.

"Looks like Crawly Pete is fit to ride again, Sheriff," he observed.

But as he breezed past the batwing doors he met the unexpected. Doc Crabtree was at the corner card table, where he spent many of his waking hours. But it wasn't solitaire this time. Doc's black satchel was on the table and the air reeked with strong medicine. In the opposite chair was his patient, with burned, swollen hands extended palm upward in front of him.

For once Bonsall's calm was shaken. His uneasiness increased as Quiggle entered, supporting the bloody, haggard Darnell.

Steele entered last, with two heavy canvas sacks resting on his left arm. He set them on the bar. He opened one and dumped the contents. Doc Crabtree blinked and stared over his thick specs.

"They're silver dollar dies!" he exclaimed. "How come?"

"So that's why yuh prowled around the charcoal camp, huh, Sheriff?" cried Shorty.

Steele silently spilled the other sack. Coins rolled out and some dropped to the floor.

"But those are Mexican pesos!" Doc Crabtree pointed out. "Dollar dies and Mex pesos! What's up, Steele?"

"And here's some of the money Bonsall made."

The sheriff smiled, flipping a bright new dollar onto the bar. Thimble Jack picked it up and dropped it.

"Rings true," he stated.

"Pesos have more silver in 'em than dollars do," Steele said. "Less alloy."

"Nobody was cheated, then," Old Man Bonsall mumbled in a low tone.

"Except Uncle Sam," Steele retorted. "Good, clean money, but counterfeit. Reckon we all know why yuh always paid cash, Bonsall."

In a sudden rush to finish his job, Doc Crabtree wound bandage around an ointment-smeared hand. As he worked, Bonsall drew a deep breath that was almost a sigh.

"Counterfeit? Nobody ever woulda spotted 'em as such. Before comin' to West Texas, I worked in the Denver mint."

"Where, among other things, yuh should have learned that other men have thought up this bright scheme of remolding cheap pesos into United States coin," Steele told him. "That's why there's a law down in Mexico against luggin' silver pesos out of that country."

Bonsall's moody eyes slowly lifted.

"There's just one bet yuh overlooked, Steele," he said.

The words were a signal for the door to the back room to be kicked open. Bulking hugely in the opening stood Big Jim Powers. He held a rifle at hip level.

"Don't budge, Steele!" he shouted. "Grab his irons, there, Quiggle!"

Shorty stood in the center of the space in front of the bar. He knew better than to reach. Powers' rifle had him and the sheriff almost in line. What he did was true to his habit of doing droll and unexpected things in the tensest situations.

HE FLUNG a jaunty, untroubled grin at the stairway opening that led to the crude hotel quarters upstairs. In the failing light of this late winter afternoon the shadows were heavy in the recess. Moreover, from where Powers stood, he could not see past the door frame.

"Don't shoot, Pete Crowley," Shorty said coolly. "We want this bunch alive and complete, with the feathers on."

Bonsall rapped out a curse and his legs grated as he half-rose and spun around to peer into the stair opening almost directly behind him. Young Quiggle froze in the act of reaching for Steele's Colts. The muzzle of Powers' rifle whipped around to the empty stairway.

With liquid smoothness, the sheriff drew. It seemed that a shiny Colt leaped into his right hand. Glasses on the back bar jarred and rattled to the heavy report.

The rifle was fairly blown out of Powers'

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Renegade Range

By ED EARL REPP

When Big Jim Bradford of the Box B falls victim to a drygulcher's bullet, his daughter Bonnie inherits a mess of gun trouble that calls for some mighty fast action!

CHAPTER I

Model for a Mate

THE warm kiss of the Arizona sun felt good to Bonnie Bradford as she sat on a low ledge of rock beside the tumbling stream in the pine-clad Tularosas and splashed her small, bare feet in the cool water. It sent the blood tingling up through her slender, tanned limbs that had once been numb and useless.

Bonnie held her legs out straight before her, lifted her riding skirt a little above the knees and studied them reflectively.

In memory, the roar of rodeo crowds swelled above the musical gurgle of the stream. Again she saw herself leaving the chutes in a flurry of dust and pounding hoofs, with screaming, lurching horseflesh doing its best to pitch her to the ground.

That had been five years ago when they billed her as "Bonnie Bradford, Queen of Bronc Busters and Champion Cowgirl." She had been the toast of rodeos, riders and public alike, from Madison Square Garden to Pendleton.

It was the boast of her admirers that a bronc that could toss her had never been foaled. Thousands of dollars in side bets had been laid down and paid off on her breath-taking rides.

And then one day it had happened.

Gilmore Stadium had been packed to the rafters with a thrill-mad crowd. Los Angeles had never been a "natural" as rodeo towns go, but people deserted Broadway and Hollywood Boulevard this day to witness Bonnie's performances. It had been rumored that Jule Sande, rodeo promoter and stockman, was going to introduce the wildest untamed string of buckers ever seen before in an arena, and Bonnie was billed to ride the meanest, a mouse-colored outlaw named Boot Hill. The ride was to be the thrill sensation of the show —and it was.

The crowd was on its feet at Boot Hill's first jump, she remembered vividly. But to her it had been but a blurred sea of color. Long before the ten-second whistle would have shrilled out, blood had been seeping in twin streams from her nostrils. Boot Hill had been a demon of power and cunning, sunfishing, leaping, coming down on stiff legs with a jolt to snap a rider's neck. Before she had gone with him more than a dozen bone-crushing yards she knew she had met her match. Boot Hill, true to his name, had been sending her there for the last roundup.

Twice the vicious beast swung his bared teeth at her ankles as she roweled. Twice they caught her and the pinch burned even through her hand-tooled riding boots. Then Boot Hill had played his trump cards, a quick succession of pinwheels and a straight jolt, arching his back as he landed.

Bonnie shut her eyes now and shuddered a little as she visioned it. She had hit the ground, hard. Before the pick-up riders could get into action, Boot Hill had turned and with bared teeth bore down upon her, flung her aside and came down upon her spine with one driving forehoof.

FOR three years thereafter, Bonnie had made her greatest effort, a performance that astounded the best medical men of the country. By sheer will and faith in the Ramrod of the Heavens, she had learned to walk again, had exercised those numb, shrunken legs until they were once again as shapely and strong as ever. And five years is a long time for a rodeo trouper to be off the fields. The longing in her eyes betrayed that.

But "Big Jim" Bradford, her father and

Jim Lord was being held while Hub's gunbarrel whirled through the air

owner of Box B, would not listen. Again she remembered the love and pain stamped on his fine face when he had come to her after the accident. She could picture him now, his mighty fists clenched white as he had watched her faltering attempts at walking, hopeless despair bowing his big, slab-muscled body. His great parental love for her had made him a willing slave, ministering to her helplessness. He had even carried her up here to Tularosas many times to let her bask in the pine-scented warmth and paddle in the shallow pools of the stream.

She thrilled anew at his might and the doggedness with which he had built up the Box B, emerging at last as the undisputed king of the Mesquite Valley cattlemen, a just man, but one so hard that his name was a by-word along the cow country frontiers of Arizona. Word had gone out to the lawless element that as long as he lived, rustling Box B cattle was business, *muy peligroso!*

Bonnie had seen him handle men as fearlessly as she had handled the outlaw broncs of the rodeo arenas. He was a born leader and only this morning had found it necessary to fire a tough gun-toter from the ranch.

Bonnie had wakened before sun-up to the snorting of broncs being cinched, the hustle and bustle of an awakened cow spread. It was a most interesting part of the day to her when men were preparing for the range. All the sounds of the rodeo chutes were there and she loved it.

But now she recalled the sudden argument between her father and Flynn, interrupting the usual banter at the corrals.

"Yuh can cash this pay check in at Hidalgo, Flynn!" Big Jim had roared. "Yuh're through here. My men work for their money and don't waste time wanderin' off to sneak drinks in the Hidalgo honkatonks! Hit leather and get goin'!"

An ugly epithet from Flynn mocked him, followed by the thud of a chopping fist.

Then punching through the dawn and tightening a steel band around Bonnie's heart, had come a shot!

Flynn was lying on his back in the dust when she reached the window, his gun knocked from his grasp by her father's lightning fists. Triumphantly Big Jim stood over him, waiting for him to rise. The big puncher crawled erect, his eyes gleaming hatred in his dark, battered face.

"Yuh'll be sorry for this, Bradford," he bit out.

"The sun's almost an hour away," the rancher gave back. "You won't see it rise on this spread. That means ride!" And he collared Flynn roughly and rushed him straight for his horse, boosting him bodily into the saddle. "Step back on Box B range again an' I'll stomp the livin' lights out of yuh, Flynn!" he threatened. "That goes for all you other renegades that got the boot off here, includin' Bud Cartwright, Rocky Stagg and your other night-ridin' crony, Three Fingered Jack Kline!"

As Flynn roweled cruelly away, Bonnie wondered why "Hub" Crandall had hired him and the others in the first place. The foreman must have known they were a vicious crew. All of them had of late been making mysterious rides away from the ranch at night and lawlessness seemed to be building rapidly around Hidalgo town not far away.

But the same sun that only that morning had seen Flynn riding off Box B range, was now setting beyond the Seven Devils Hills to the west. Bonnie slipped quickly into her stockings and boots, arose from the ledge with the easy grace of a girl born to a saddle and stepped to her horse ground-anchored nearby. The sun caught the gold of her hair as she shook out the long curls in a proud gesture. It gleamed as if afire.

Taking her sombrero from the horn where it hung by its slender chin-stay, she swung up. Bringing her steel-dust mare around she sat a moment, contemplating the lowlands below. Off to the right the sun touched a bright piece of metal, then she saw it gleam on the conchoed hat band of her father. Always he rode out to meet her when she came up here and he waved, his joy at seeing her finding an echo in her heart.

She had raised her arm high to answer him when she saw him lurch suddenly in his saddle.

From the distance came the flat smash of a rifle fired twice in quick succession. Big Jim Bradford slid to the ground, rolled over limply and lay still.

Bonnie Bradford had no recollection of her wild ride down the steep mountain slants to the valley below. Nor of the easy trail she might have followed had it not been for her overpowering desire to reach her father's side. Only supreme skill at handling her horse saved her many times from certain injury or even death as she hedge-hopped the mare over clumps of catclaw, rocks and cutbanks.

HER throat was one tight ache and her eyes were glazed with burning tears. Biting her lips to control her emotion, she sped like an arrow across the level of the prairie. When she dismounted, running, to drop beside Big Jim, a stream of blood trickled down her left arm from the slashing of some razor-sharp *cholla* or evergreen *coma*. Her riding skirt was ripped in a dozen places and crimson scratches showed on her legs. Tears smarted in a cut across her cheek.

But these things went unnoticed. All her thoughts were for her father—and he was dead. She knew that as she took his leonine head in her arms. Shocked and utterly speechless, she laid the head back gently and ran her slender fingers through the graying locks. In dumb silence, an incredulous expression etched on her oval face, she touched his cheek, as if to

summon the life that was gone. Then something died within her. She fell across his great chest with a wordless cry of anguish.

How long she lay there she did not know. Tears flowed but failed to relieve her. She was numb once more, like her legs had been, and filled with terror for the time when she could realize the full extent of her loss. Big Jim hadn't been just a father. He had been that and friend and life combined—the living model of the mate she had hoped to have by her side some day.

The bark of a coyote on some nearby knoll, the scent of death in the air, brought her up with a jolt of realization. She had to get her father's body to the ranch some way, but knew she could never lift his weight to a saddle. She couldn't leave him here even for an hour. The warning from the knoll froze her blood.

But heroically she struggled to lift Big Jim until the old pain in her spine interfered. Exhausted, dazed and anguished, she dropped down to her knees beside him and hid her face in her hands, giving way to her sorrow as only a woman can when grief has stricken her.

Some time just before darkness came charging wave on wave over the valley, she heard hoofbeats approaching and halting near her. Then gentle hands were lifting her up, stilling her sobs against a flannel-clad chest. There was sympathy in the way the man held her to him, comfort in the soft touch of his hands on her shoulders.

THEN his voice, oddly like her father's, but younger, came softly to her ears in words that were filled with wisdom and great understanding.

"Someone who meant that much to you can't die, ma'am," it said. "Not really, for he'll live on in yore thoughts. Yuh've still got him and he'll live on forever. Just remember him always as he was when yuh last saw him, before he answered the last call."

Like a child, wandering, dazed by her sorrow in a strange world, she raised her eyes to him. Through tears she inventoried the stranger's tanned, craggy features, the wide, strong mouth, the greenish-blue eyes and the calm, self-reliant strength of him. She had never seen him before, but at this moment he was a friend.

There could be no fear of a man so gentle, so blessed with wisdom.

She pressed her face to him and let his words gather her in.

She could almost see him smiling as he spoke, his glance sweeping the broad expanses about them.

"I've always liked this time of day, just after sunset with night comin' on."

She knew he was just talking to calm her, to give her something to think about other than tragedy and sorrow. But as he went on she began to get a clear picture of the man, what he thought and what he stood for. And she felt a breathless fear that she might miss one word, for it seemed that she had known him from somewhere, or had been waiting for him.

"When it's cool like it is now, and the night takes over while the sun rests up for another day, I always feel kind of rested myself," he said. "It seems like mebbe there's somethin' or somebody else beside us—something bigger. Some folks say that's God. Me, I don't know as I've got a name for it, but I know He's there, and whenever I look for Him, why my problems don't seem near so bad as they did before. I take it that all the problems of yore father there are over now."

Listening, she raised her face suddenly and felt the warmth of his cheek against her brow. Strong arms held her close to him and from them she gained new strength. She could feel the thudding of his heart within the steel-thewed chest and felt safe, secure. It was as if she had been storm-tossed on a tearing, grinding sea of heartbreak, and had at last found haven.

But abruptly she remembered!

He sensed the change at once and stepped back a full pace. One hand swept the Stetson from his head and the other ran slowly through his thick, tawny hair.

"Ma'am, I'm hopin', yuh'll forgive me for holdin' yuh like that," he apologized. "I only meant to comfort yuh."

She nodded, saw that he was as tall as her father had been, with lean, pantherlike grace in his tapered body.

His eyes were questioning and she laid a hand impulsively on his arm.

"It's all right," she said. "You are very kind and I am not ungrateful."

His face relaxed a little and the corners of his lips turned up with pleasure.

"Thank yuh, ma'am," he said quietly. "My name's Jim Lord—up from Hidalgo way. Saw yuh was in trouble whilst ridin' by over yonder and came up to help if I could."

Bonnie choked at the name. Another Jim—the same name as her father's!

"Anything wrong, ma'am?" he asked.

"No, oh, no," she said hastily. "I was thinking you might help me get my father back to the Box B. I'm Bonnie Bradford."

He wasted no time in idle talk now, but helped her to her horse. She was glad because she did not wish to see what was to follow. Jim Lord might have trouble, for Jim Bradford was a big man, too.

But in moments Lord was back, mounting behind her, Bradford's body hung sacklike over the saddle of his mount. The Box B pony, spooked by the killing, had long since disappeared, with dragging reins, toward the home corrals.

With the still burden in tow, they rode in the same direction, Bonnie successively drying her tears and giving way to them again, Jim Lord's comforting, courage-instilling voice always reassuring her.

CHAPTER II

Kill-crazy

CONCHITA RIOS, Jim Bradford's buxom Mexican housekeeper who had aided in nursing Bonnie back to health after her fateful exit from the Gilmore arena, met them at the edge of the ranch yard, the knowledge of greater sorrow already in her dark eyes. Big Jim's horse had already returned riderless, the saddle spattered with dried blood. When she saw the burden on Jim Lord's mount, she sought to pull Bonnie down into the shelter of her ample brown arms. But Bonnie stoically patted her shoulder.

"I'm all right, *Madre.*"

She was surprised at the steadiness of her voice and the feeling of strength to face the days to come. It seemed to have something to do with the knowledge that another Jim was here to give her courage as her father had in her darkest days of sickness and distress.

"My poor *pequeno nina!*" Conchita's dark eyes filled with tears, and she kissed Bonnie's cheek. "*Madre de Dios,* how you have suffered, *querida.*"

"It is hard"—Bonnie brushed away her tears with the tip of her finger—"but remember the unwritten law that I learned in the arena. The show must go on. Prepare a room for Mr. Lord. He helped me with Dad and will be staying tonight."

Conchita's rapierlike glance stabbed up at Jim Lord in quick appraisal. Then she nodded, inscrutable, satisfied, and moved toward the house with ponderous tread.

The crew was still up, gathered in the moon-bathed ranch yard beside Hub Crandall who had been saddling up. The ramrod's slitted eyes ran over Jim Lord's horse and its silent cargo, then settled with instant suspicion on its owner. Gun-belts crossed across his muscular thighs, holsters tied down hard, he shouldered his way through the men.

Bonnie had never had much to do with the Box B crew and knew little of the ranch business. She hadn't liked the foreman much and had always been just a little afraid of him, for he was quick-tempered and would probably shoot to kill at the drop of a hat. His appearance was slovenly, but he knew cattle.

"I was just fixin' to rackout lookin' for you, Bonnie," he rumbled in his heavy voice, his glances running up and down Jim Lord with the same impersonal way he appraised a horse or a range bull. "What's the story and how does this jasper fit into it?"

Jim Lord seemed to bristle. "Yuh're not, by any chance," he said flatly, "hintin' I might have triggered Bradford, mister?"

Bonnie was quick to see the challenging light ignite in Hub's somber eyes. It occurred to her then that it was the first time the foreman had not called her Miss Bradford. Big Jim had kept his men in hand. They had worked for him, but had nothing to do with the ranchhouse or Bonnie.

"I ain't hintin' nothin', cowboy." The ramrod hooked thick thumbs into his belts, close to his guns and met his eyes levelly. "I'm tellin' it scary. The boss was triggered. You was handy on the scene of the killin'. How do we know yuh didn't gun him?"

The men of the crew angled up, grouping around the big ramrod, their faces grim and belligerent. Bonnie swept them with a glance.

There was the little ageless Mexican, Mike Lopez, his small brown hands on guns that looked almost too large for them. There was sorrow in his black eyes and his thin lips were closed tight as if fighting back the emotion he felt. He had idolized Big Jim Bradford.

Beside him stood "Buck" Thornton, top bronc man on the Box B, who had been the only man who ever bare-topped Jule Sande's killer horse, Buckin' Dolly, for an eight-second ride. His face was set and stern, a range man who has tasted rodeo glitter and returned to the herds with a broken pelvis.

Next to him was Indian Joe, inscrutable, silent, the gleam in his eyes his only emotion. They held on the inert body of Jim Bradford as two other men carried the body into the house.

They were a strange lot, Bonnie thought. A mixture of Mexican, Indian, Border breed and white, held together by a common bond—loyalty to Big Jim and the Box B iron. She wondered what would happen to that loyalty now that her father was dead.

"We don't know who did it, Crandall," she said to the foreman. "He was shot from ambush and I don't know of anyone who would have wanted his death badly enough to—to kill him that way."

The men stirred. Buck Thornton's gaze left Jim Lord.

"It's hard to tell, Miss Bradford," he said tersely. "Flynn might've wanted to, if he'd had the nerve. But I think there's more behind it than revenge."

"What do you mean?" Bonnie demanded.

"Well," Buck returned. "Yore dad had plenty trouble with Slade Trimball, the cattle dealer over in Hidalgo. Big Jim always said as how Slade didn't pay for all the cattle that went through his chutes."

The accusation hung there, of a man she had never seen or seldom heard of except in vague conversations between her father and Crandall. Yet his very name brought grim nods from the crew and raised a nameless dread within her heart.

Hub Crandall shifted restlessly and she nodded toward him as she touched young Lord's arm.

"Hub, this is Jim Lord," she introduced. "If he hadn't helped me out there, I don't know what I'd have done—alone with Dad."

The frown on Hub's belligerent face deepened and his lips went even thinner. Lord's hand went out, but Hub Crandall ignored it.

"We've already met!" the foreman bit out in a voice that was as bleak as a winter wind. "This man works for Slade Trimball!"

"That's right, Miss Bradford," echoed Thornton. "And if anybody'd want to see Big Jim in Boot Hill, it would be Slade Trimball, because yore dad had enough on him to string up ten men!"

BONNIE was a long time in turning to face Jim Lord. But when she did she saw his face was set like granite, pale spots on his cheekbones. The impact of her hot eyes drew his face down.

"Is that true?" she demanded. "Do you work for Trimball?"

Before he replied she was aware of the crew stiffening with expectancy. Heavy breathing stopped. Mike Lopez' guns were half out of their big holsters. Indian Joe had a copper-colored fist closed around the handle of a bowie, the knuckles showing white.

"I don't now," Jim Lord said bluntly. "But I did."

Almost instantly the crew ringed him, their faces fixed with stony hatred. Magically Deke Cahoon, the ranch blacksmith, produced a rope. A thin, wicked smile claimed Hub's lips as he faced the man from Hidalgo.

"That admission signs yore death warrant, feller," he clipped. "Yuh just couldn't resist a pretty face and a chance to play hero, could yuh? After cutbankin' the boss yuh plumb liked consolin' his girl. But we don't fool that easy."

Hub had no chance to move before Jim Lord's right fist flicked out in a short, vicious jab. It traveled no more than a foot, but the power behind it jolted the burly ramrod's head back between his shoulder blades. His eyes were glazed when the head snapped back and he seemed to stand only by the solid, settled heaviness of his bulk. When he fell, he went down all at once, as if his legs had suddenly turned to rubber.

Bonnie gasped at the sight. It wasn't pretty, nor was Hub's kill-crazy expression when he lurched back, half-dazed, to his feet. Buck Thornton and Indian Joe was holding Lord then. Shaking his head like an enraged bull, Hub wheeled, his right-hand gun making a hissing sound as he palmed it from the greased holster. The barrel whistled through the air in front of Lord's face with his first wobbly swing.

"Yuh sin-pimpled son!" he mouthed thickly. "I'll pistol-whip yore brains out and send 'em back to Slade Trimball on a platter!"

Fighting the fear instilled in her by this sudden rise of kill lust, Bonnie struggled to find her voice. Her training was inadequate for such a situation. She had been aware of Hub's cruel streak, but she couldn't believe that any man would be cowardly enough to beat another while he was held and unable to defend himself.

And she couldn't understand this desire to kill that lurked in the narrowed eyes of the crew, unless it was their loyalty to Big Jim and an overpowering desire to avenge his death as quickly as they could.

"Hub Crandall!" Her voice came in a quick rush, sharp and clear. "Stop it!"

Her cry brought him swinging around with a sneer. Some power she couldn't recognize was riding rough-shod within him. He seemed to have tasted some heady beverage of triumph and was going to make the most of it.

"Get in the house!" he ordered. "We'll handle this!"

"You'll handle your tongue and your temper, Hub Crandall!" she cried, and his mouth gaped at the power and authority of her voice.

He reacted with a stunned look. He didn't know this Bonnie Bradford who had tamed some of the worst outlaw broncs the rodeo circuits had ever seen. She didn't know herself. Hub's stepping out of line, the strict line established by her father, ignited some strange power within her and the metamorphosis was sudden and complete. It was as if Big Jim himself had come back to stand behind her, filling her with the strength and courage that was his. For a moment she gave free rein to the Bradford blood in her veins.

"Buck! Joe! Take your hands off him!" she clipped. "There'll be no hanging or gun-whipping on this ranch as long as I am running it, and from here on, that's just what I'm doing. You have no proof against this man!" She turned to Lord swiftly, so she wouldn't have to think too much. "You'd better go now, Mr. Lord."

Seconds ticked off while he watched her. She saw his clean, handsome face harden and she felt his level gaze disconcerting. She couldn't keep the accusation from her eyes, but it wasn't in her heart. He had been connected with her father's enemy, Slade Trimball. And he had been near when her father was murdered.

His honeyed words could have been a front to project himself into her sphere of things. She had no proof of any guilt, but it was enough for doubt, despite the strong tugging of her heart-strings. She didn't want to hurt him. She had to sate the doubt that Hub Crandall had inspired.

Jim Lord finally nodded, swallowed back the words he might have uttered. Then he hit leather and rode off. Bonnie watched him as if part of her was falling away. It hurt. Lord had been kind. He had a fine philosophy. She wondered vaguely if he could, despite his fine qualities, turn to cutbank killing for a ruthless employer.

Deliberately she put a theoretic pigging string on her emotion, throttling a strong yearning to call him back. Something returned her attention then to the muttering Box B riders. She gave a start. The group had increased. Her eyes flicked over them and a cold premonition of disaster made her flinch.

Flynn was back—and with him were "Bud" Cartright, "Three-fingered Jack" Kline and "Rocky" Stagg. Her father had fired and driven them from the Box B for laziness and nocturnal rides that indicated a connection with the lawlessness building on the Hidalgo grasslands.

Even as words formed in her throat to question their presence, she began to tremble deep inside of her. The courage necessary to intercede for Jim Lord washed out of her, leaving her weak and frightened.

The men stared at her curiously, as if awaiting her next move. Flynn's swart face was challenging. There was a smirk on the beefy lips of Three-fingered Jack. Desire rode the eyes of Rocky Stagg. Hub waited, his expression one of smug triumph. It was hard to fathom.

Bonnie turned abruptly and hurried into the house, lest she lose the ground she had already won.

CHAPTER III

One Against Hades

ONCE in bed, Bonnie sent Conchita away. There was hurt in the kindly old Mexican *mujer's* eyes, but Bonnie felt that she had to be alone to think things out. Difficulty lay ahead of her. She knew that fully. The weight of responsibility was like the weight of the world upon her shoulders.

Somehow she had to find the courage she needed to carry on, a courage that would not flame and die in the face of trouble. It had to stick with her as it had in her rodeo days when she met and tamed the killers of the bronc chutes.

It had been skill and nerve against brute power and cunning then. Now it was something else, a struggle to subdue the most cruel and sly of all animals—men! You could ride a bronc to a standstill and make him do your bidding by the tug of a rein. The human species of the killer was something else.

As Bonnie lay abed with streamers of pale moonlight beaming through her windows, she realized she had passed the little-girl stage of her life where she could confide all her troubles to the sympathetic ears of her father or Conchita and then weep them away within strong, comforting arms of protection. She couldn't even cry now, much as she wanted to. She must lie there trembling and trying to see into the future, faced with a world suddenly turned cold and cruel against her. Alone like a single grain of sand at the mercy of turbulent winds. Never in her life had she felt so deserted.

For Big Jim Bradford was gone. The gigantic, loving father whose affection had been her world had died before her eyes, leaving her confronted with a world of strong, wrathful and headstrong men.

The words of Jim Lord came back to her suddenly: "Someone who meant that much to yuh can't die. Not really. He'll live forever in yore thoughts. Yuh've still got him."

They were comforting words again—until with equal suddenness she remembered that Jim Lord, too, was gone as surely as Big Jim Bradford. Perhaps if she had let him explain that need not have been.

But there had been no time for that. The temper of the crew might not have waited, the men might not have believed his explanations. The Box B men had wanted vengeance. They would have hanged Jim Lord to the nearest tree without the slightest hesitation. She took some comfort from the fact that she had saved his life.

She discovered herself torn between two forces. There was a great need for him which she refused to acknowledge and which sought to disregard all other evidence. And there was Hub Crandall's accusations: "—couldn't resist a pretty face, could yuh? After cutbankin' the boss, yuh plumb liked consolin' his girl."

And Jim Lord had admitted working for Slade Trimball, the crooked cattle dealer of Hidalgo, a man hated by Big Jim for his unscrupulous dealings.

Bonnie ran her mind back over the remembered, lean height of him, the broad, rugged shoulders, the cut of his square jaw, the greenish-blue eyes—a man of wisdom and philosophy, yet one of mystery who could either be a knight without armor or a cold-blooded killer.

Sleep only mocked her. She turned and tossed, eyes wide in the gloom. The shadows were grotesque and visions of the shooting of her father rose to haunt her. She experienced grief and sorrow, and pain and loss. But she could not give in and cry it out. Too much faced her that had to be decided, weighed, adjudged and sorted. The ranch, Hub's strange attitude, the men her father had discharged and who had weirdly returned, and Jim Lord.

Her heart pounded heavily, sending blood cascading through her veins. It seemed so loud that she could hear it, like the thunder of racing hoofs. She sat up suddenly. Riders were galloping away from the ranch, heading west toward Hidalgo. She wondered if the men were going to town to have it out with Slade Trimball. For a few moments there was utter silence about the spread.

And then within the house there was a movement. Heavy footfalls sounded. Her pulses leaped. She heard a man walking across the

main room with its beamed ceiling and stone hearth. Then he turned into the hall toward her room. For a moment it sounded as if her father were coming in after a long day on the range.

The sounds ceased presently and Conchita's voice sheared the stillness, angry and a little afraid.

"What you want here?" she demanded.

A growled cursed presaged the sound of a sharp blow, like a heavy open hand striking solidly against a loose cheek. A door slammed, then the man continued his approach down the hall.

Alarmed, Bonnie sprang out of bed, grabbing up a dressing gown and slipping quickly into it. She reached the door and before she could turn the knob it burst open almost in her face. A cry tore from her throat.

Hub Crandall stood on the threshold, his eyes squinty and red with liquor. They ran over her in one burning glance and her hands lifted automatically to her throat.

"Hi, Bonnie," he said and leered at her. "I've got somethin' I been wantin' to talk over with yuh for a long, long time."

WITH a shudder, Bonnie noted the thickness of his voice, read his intentions in the widening of his nostrils. His eyes came to rest on the neckline of her dressing gown. She gathered it to her, a numbing chill making her flesh creep.

"Get out!" she ordered. "You're fired, Crandall! If Dad was here, he'd break every bone in your body!"

Hub chuckled and stepped forward, holding the door open as she sought to close it against him. "He ain't sister," he said huskily. "And yuh ain't got anybody now to look after yuh but me. Just get down off yore high-horse, honey, and we'll get along all right."

He reached heavily for her arm, and with all the strength she could muster she smashed her clenched fist against his jaw. The stubbled whiskers felt like barbed-wire. Her knuckles, sinking against cushioning flesh, contacted bone, and the shock ran up her arm with tingling force.

He staggered, surprise riding his face. His eyes lost their gleam of craving and burned with quick anger.

"Yuh cussed little sidewinder!" he rasped out. "Yuh'll sing a different tune before I'm through with yuh, and when yuh find out I'm the only one that stands between you and losin' this ranch. Slade Trimball's been just honin' to get his hooks on yore cattle. Now that he's finished off yore old man, he'll start grabbin'. Jim Lord took care of that for him, and now Slade'll move in. He might even strike tonight. That's why I just sent the crew out to watch the main herd."

Bonnie's mind, moving at lightning speed behind the curtain of her fear, quickly noted his lie.

"Then why did you send them west, toward Hidalgo, when the herd is at the east end of the valley?" she countered. "You're lying, Hub, to cover up something."

For a moment he was befuddled and his hands dropped to his sides, his face blank as he struggled for an answer. She knew his guard was down and she threw her voice at him.

"What's the game, Crandall?" she demanded, with a desperation that was aflame within her. "What are Flynn and those other men doing back here after my father discharged them and ordered them never to set foot on this ranch again?"

He had control of his wits now. His voice was placating, cunning.

"They didn't stay," he said. "They were just ridin' through. And we moved the herd durin' the day to the west range."

"That's another lie!" she charged, moving back away from him inch by inch to get closer to the bureau where her gun lay. "All day long I was up in the hills, commanding a view of the entire valley. If you'd moved that herd I'd most certainly have seen it! Now get out before you make me kill you!"

He closed in suddenly, sensing her purpose.

"Come here!" he rasped, and his powerful arms went around her with crushing force. The sickening odor of whiskey was breathed across her face.

"If we're goin' to work together," he went on, "yuh can afford to be nice to me, honey. I ain't so bad."

Disgust and desperation gave Bonnie the strength to overcome her fear momentarily as he tried to kiss her. With all her power she kicked at him, struggled against his constricting embrace. But he held her tighter, until his gunbelts gouged her cruelly. Her whole body hurt from being clamped against the rough, sweaty wool of his shirt. Panic ignited within her and grew into a flame.

He was bending his head to kiss her forcibly and then, blindly, she felt his crushing grip relax. She was free!

She hadn't heard anyone enter the room. But hands were clamped about Hub's throat when she opened her eyes. The foreman's face was a bloated, gasping red and desperately he clawed at the strangling, steel-thewed fingers biting ever deeper into his windpipe and jugular. Behind his blocky shoulders Bonnie saw Jim Lord's face, set like a white, granite mask. The muscles of his neck bulged into knots as he gave more power to his hands.

He flung the burly ramrod to the wall and followed him with a quick, catlike stride.

Bonnie stopped breathing as she saw Hub whirl. Like bullbats diving in feeding flight, his hands streaked to his holsters and came up, guns palmed. To her racing senses, red seemed to grow around the twin muzzles before she caught the jarring concussions. The heavy explosions rocked the room and made the pictures rattle on the walls.

Horrified, she saw Jim Lord wilt toward the floor.

For an instant Hub, too, thought he had downed the tawny giant from Hidalgo. But Jim Lord's reaction to the blazing guns of the ramrod was but a feint. In his eagerness to kill, Crandall had missed his shots, and now Lord was surging toward him, his gun lifting in a wide arc.

Cursing luridly, the foreman rushed to ear back his gun hammers again. He was too late. With a chopping motion, Lord's gun barrel smashed his extended hands down. Their murderous cargoes thumped to the floor.

For the first time since he had hired on the Box B, Bonnie saw fear cross the face of Hub Crandall. But there was a treacherous gleam in his whiskey-shriveled eyes.

"Looks like yuh got me under a split stick now, mister," he said, meekly enough. "But we'll settle this later, some time when yuh ain't got the drop."

"We'll settle it now, Crandall," bit out Jim Lord, and he chocked his gun back into his holster. "The cutter stays in the pouch. Put up yore hands and start swingin'. I'm goin' to teach yuh some respect for a lady and yore betters."

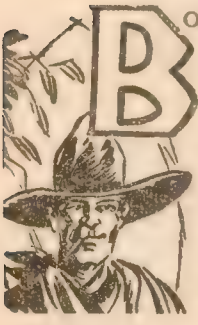
Hub Crandall's eyes gave him away. Bonnie saw the killer fires ignite in them again. Bowie steel, snatched seemingly from nowhere, appeared in his hands.

Jim Lord acted like lightning. His right fist flicked out and up under the ramrod's arm and connected solidly on the point of his jaw. He followed it with a swishing left that caught Hub in the mouth as his knees buckled. Bonnie hid her eyes from the splatter of blood and gore. It wasn't pretty for a girl to see, but Jim Lord reveled in the misery he dealt his antagonist.

Shock of the punches made his arms tingle to his shoulders. There was no tenderness about him now and even as Hub slumped down under the vicious barrage of blows to the head and face, Lord derived a certain pleasure from the punishment he dealt out.

CHAPTER IV

Nocturnal Treachery



BONNIE had ridden too many wild rodeo broncs to faint, but that had been five years before. This fist battle made her feel weak, and also there was the reaction of her shuddering experience with the uncouth ramrod. She needed support when Jim Lord moved to her. It seemed natural and right that his arms should come about her and hold her close.

He held her to him, but gently. His gentleness and consideration gave her a strong sense of safety. And she had again that feeling that here was peace, that her troubles and fears were as nothing by comparison with the soothing that had calmed her on the range. Again Jim Lord's very presence seemed to give her a vibrant, warm vitality that she had never known before.

She knew she loved Jim Lord. In the minute when she had thought he was falling under Hub Crandall's murderous bullets, her very life seemed suspended. It was as if the world had suddenly stopped turning and there was no more night or day. The anguish already in her heart had been doubled, then. And now, although some powerful force held him silent, tightening the hard lines of his jaws, she knew that he felt the same way. Together they looked into heaven and both silently rejoiced at what they saw.

And into this moment of quiet came the muffled beat of approaching hoofs. The hall doors were open and she could hear the growled commands of a horseman as he drew rein in the yard. Then steps sounded on the porch. A voice clipped through the silence, as of a man more accustomed to giving orders than receiving them.

"Hub! Hub Crandall!" The voice came, piercing, yet slightly hushed, perhaps by the night, perhaps by the mysterious caller's mission.

Bonnie's eyes sought Jim Lord's. He cautioned her to be quiet, and glanced at the somber silhouette of Hub Crandall, propped against the wall, trying heroically to shake the cobwebs from his befuddled brain.

Then once more the voice called impatiently:

"Hub! Come here!"

Suddenly Hub lurched himself to his feet and like a whipped dog moved quickly out into the hall. They heard his stumbling footfalls as he retreated. Bonnie started to say something, but Jim halted her, placing his fingers over her lips. He seemed to be waiting for something, listening hard.

The quiet for a moment was oppressive, and then they caught voices from the porch. Desperation and a gloating triumph rode Hub's tone.

"Slade, Jim Lord's in there!" he bit out. "Gimme a gun and I'll punch that quitter so full of holes he'll look like a sieve! He run out on the gang and we ought to gun him down. Let me have yore cutter, Boss."

"From the looks of you"—Slade Trimball's voice came almost inaudibly to Bonnie and Jim—"he gave yuh a workin' over yuh won't forget. Yuh got a little too ringy, Hub."

"But he run out on us an' is sidin' with the girl," Hub said tersely. "You know what that means. He'll see us strung up!"

Suddenly the picture was clear to Bonnie.

Slade Trimball had been somehow getting away with Box B cattle, either by rustling or

by a short count at the shipping pens. She had Buck's word for that. And the Hidalgo cattie dealer had been waiting only for her father's death to clean them all out. It followed, then, that he had doubtlessly engineered the killing of Big Jim Bradford and was here now to run off the main herd.

She needed no second guess to understand that Hub Crandall was working for Slade while holding down his job as ramrod of the Box B! That explained how he had known Jim Lord had been associated with the cattle dealer.

One of Trimball's men had killed Big Jim. And Jim Lord could have been the man. Bonnie's whole being grew cold as she put the puzzle together in her mind. Whom should she trust, she asked herself, before passing certain judgment. Then once more Trimball's voice reached her, forcing her to push away from Jim Lord's arms.

"Lord ain't runnin' out on us, yuh fool!" the cattle dealer rasped. "He was only takin' care of a little outside business for me, as part of our plan to grab the cattle and the ranch at the same time. With him marryin' the girl we wouldn't have no trouble coppin' the spread. Let's ride now. I want all them Box B critters in my shippin' pens by sun-up. A cattle train is bein' made up and we can get 'em out of Hidalgo an' on their way to Chicago before anybody knows the difference."

He raised his voice a trifle.

"Come on, Lord! Yuh can take care of the girl later. We've got plenty of more important work to do right now!"

Bonnie Bradford's thoughts became an echoing emptiness into which Slade Trimball's words and syllables beat like hammer strokes upon an anvil—"Lord ain't runnin' out on us —only taking care of a little outside business for me."

That outside business was the cold-blooded killing of her father, Big Jim Bradford! And herding her marriage so that Slade Trimball could grab the Box B from her. Helping the gang to glut her ranges of its prime market cattle. She could see it all now. And she had thought she loved Jim Lord!

Her very soul turned sick at the extent of the duplicity. She stood like a dead tree stump, insensible, unfeeling. Even when Jim gripped her arms with a fierce desperation and poured whispered words into her ear, begging her to trust him, she couldn't hear or feel him. She waged the greatest fight of her life, and lost to the reasoning suspicion dictated to her.

THEN he was gone to help, she thought, run off the herds her father had built up for her. She didn't seem to care now, and sank to her knees because her legs refused to hold her. Hot, aching tears drenched her fingers where they pressed against her eyes.

Jim Lord had murdered her father!

After a while she became conscious of the cold pressure of the floor against her knees. The ranch lay in dead silence. The world seemed to have stopped breathing. Then she heard someone groan. Conchita!

With stumbling steps she made her way into the dark hall and found the housekeeper's room. Conchita was a dark silhouette as she squatted in a corner, rubbing a blue bruise on her chin where Hub's fist had struck her. Low Spanish words breathed through her lips with occasional reference to the cruel ramrod.

Affectionately Bonnie helped her to her feet and went into her ample arms. Like a mother comforting a fevered child Conchita held her close, patting her.

"Poor baby," she whispered in Spanish. *"El Diablo* has struck this *rancho, nina mio.* This man, Jim Lord—you love him, *querida?"*

"I hate him!" Bonnie's lips curled around the words.

Conchita smiled wanly. "Love and hate, *chiquita*—they are sometimes the same," she said. "Those hombres who just ride away—they are Senor Trimball's?"

Bonnie dipped her golden head in assent.

"And they are going to steal your cattle?" Conchita's black eyes seemed to give off sparks in the gloom. "You must not allow them, *nina mio!* You must do something about it!"

Bonnie raised her chin. Yes! Why didn't she do something about it! This was her ranch, willed to her by death, and she had been endowed with a birthright of fighting courage. Why should she stand meekly by and allow anyone to take her ranch from her? Her father was dead, but she seemed to draw strength from the memory of him, as if he still stood beside her.

Those were Jim Lord's words. She shook her head angrily and plunged back to her bedroom. When she emerged a few moments later, in shirt and levis, buckling her .38 about her slim waist, Conchita had her horse saddled. The old housekeeper watched, with arms akimbo and a wide smile on her face, as Bonnie leaped astride the spirited mount and wrenched him around toward Hidalgo.

"Show them who is their betters, *nina mio!"* Conchita's high-pitched cry reached Bonnie as she let the rangy sorrel have its head. "Break the *bandidos* as you would break a killer horse!"

The wind washed her words away and Bonnie settled down to a race through the night—alone, but unafraid and confident. In full command of her emotions she felt the hard touch of the night air wash her brain clear. She would first try to find the Box B crew. Some of them might still be loyal to the brand, enough to rally around in her final bid for her heritage here in Mesquite Valley.

But with thought of Hidalgo, Jim Lord's words began to take form in her mind, the last words he had uttered to her before riding away with Slade Trimball and Hub: "—no time to explain, Bonnie. Find Dan Purdy in Hidalgo. Tell him I sent you."

For the first time she realized that Dan Purdy's name sounded familiar, but she couldn't place it. Yet with the return to her mind of Jim's whispered instructions she caught again the desperate bid for trust in his eyes. The kiss he had pressed against her forehead came to her now with all its tenderness. A tiny spark of hope kindled in her heart.

Might there still be some sound explanation for Jim Lord's actions?

Then, as if she were afraid further thought might kill that hope, she gave full attention to her horse and flung the sorrel into its best pace through the darkness.

Reaching the west end of the valley, Bonnie saw the stealthily winking lights of Hidalgo's batwing saloon doors as they opened and closed. She headed her sorrel that way. There was no place else to look for the Box B riders, and she kept remembering that Jim Lord had asked her to come here.

She had never liked Hidalgo town. Its one street was lined with honkytonks and *cantinas* where anything could happen and did. The moon was pale now, but the town seemed to be trying to hide its ugliness from it, lurking in the shadows of a cliff like a scorpion beneath a rock. A furtive silence reigned, broken only by the low murmur of voices, the muffled sounds of clinking chips and tinny pianos.

With something of misgiving Bonnie dismounted in front of a saloon, ground-anchored her sorrel and tried hard to give herself the appearance of a man by shoving her curls up beneath her range hat. But the way her levis fitted, the smallness of her booted feet, belied her attempts.

In the saloon was no sign of a familiar face as she appraised it from the outside, looking over the batwing doors, but eyes stabbed at her like striking snakes. She had heard that killings were frequent here and the victims were usually men suspected of being undercover agents of the law. Excepting for a loose and careless local town constable, men wearing badges were considered intruders in Hidalgo.

CHAPTER V

Rustler Roundup

DISGUST made Bonnie turn away from this smoke-choked saloon and make her way to a *cantina* farther down the street. Peering through the glassed front window strange faces mocked back at her once more.

Tequila flowed freely over the bar to the big-hatted *vaqueros* from across the Border who were gathered there. Men in tight-fitting charro garb and huge-roweled Mexican bell spurs crammed the place, but there was no disorder. A contrast, she thought. The gringoes had fallen far and their neighbors from below the Border were showing them how to be gentlemen, at least. Their glances were friendly, impersonal.

Buck Thornton's drawl reached her as she approached the batwings of the third saloon, the largest and most rowdy in the town. She paused to listen.

"Come on, you ranihans," Buck was saying. "We got to start hazin' them drifters back to the herd like Hub sent us out to do. We came here for a quick drink and here we been loafin' for hours. Flynn, I'm wonderin' why yuh're so set on stayin' here to play stud when there's work to do. Cash in yore chips an' let's go!"

"Shut your trap, Thornton!"

Flynn's rasping syllables brought back to Bonnie the scene between him and her father. The arrogant authority which had crept into Hub Crandall's attitude was manifest once more in Flynn's. He was a Trimball man. No mistaking that. And that was why her father had discharged him—a renegade spy for a crooked cattle dealer who now held the Box B in the palm of his hand!

She realized she would have to weed the Box B crew out, discover the loyal hands, banish the others through their help. But events beat her to the action.

As her hand touched the batwings, Flynn's brag rose on a higher note.

"I'm runnin' the Box B outfit now," he said. "What I say goes, and I'm sayin' we're spendin' the night here and lettin' them strays hang theirselves on bobwire if they want to! Understand, Thornton, or do yuh want to make somethin' out of it?"

"Yuh're plumb right I do, Flynn!" was Buck's quick retort, then the smash of a short gun sent the echoes rolling back and forth along the false fronts of the street.

Men ringed the stud layout as Bonnie pushed into the saloon. Flynn, his gun still gripped in a feelingless fist, was falling grotesquely to the floor. Buck Thornton was chocking his own smoking weapon back into its holster.

"That was the biggest mistake yuh ever made, Flynn," he was saying. "The first was thinkin' everybody on the Box B was an owl-hooter like you. Well, there's some of us left, includin' me, that ain't interested in the kind of wages Slade Trimball pays!"

"Buck!"

Bonnie's whole soul was in that one word. All eyes turned to her as she stood in the doorway. Her glance swept the room. Only one man there seemed unimpressed by the happenings, as if he knew death was no novelty in Hidalgo. He leaned against the bar, his face inscrutable. But the white hair at his temples seemed to bristle.

She rushed up to the tall Box B rider. Once he had thrilled millions with his rodeo performances and had retired when his bones

were crushed, to limp his way through the balance of his life with a pelvis that had been so shattered as to make one leg a bit shorter than the other. A fierce admiration surged through her for this man as she ran up to him.

"Buck Thornton!" Her voice was filled with emotion. "I heard what you said and I'm grateful to you. Range nor rodeo never turned out a better man to be foreman of the Box B. From here on, you hold that job, as long as you live. . . ."

Buck Thornton was taken aback. "But, ma'am," he stammered, "I ain't done nothin' to justify that. All I done was gun down a snake that was tryin' to corrupt the whole outfit."

"That's enough for me!" Bonnie could have thrown her arms about his neck. "Get your men together. Trimball's trying to run off our main herd tonight. And Hub's in with him. He sent you down here to get you out of the way!"

The Box B men crowded together, loyal to the Bradford sound of her orders. Indian Joe was beside Buck as they started for the door. Mike Lopez, the little Mexican of the big guns and small hands, had a gleam in his dark eyes.

"*Si, senorita,*" he said, passing her. "Thees night she ron red weeth the blood of *bandidos.* All I weesh ees to ee-shoot thees Hub Crandall! Een hot place he weel learn too late that all men are not of the same mold, no?"

Bonnie patted him assuringly on the shoulder as he went by her, his small figure half a head below her height. But Mike Lopez was all man, swarthy, kind, a fighting man who could be counted upon.

On impulse she threw a question at the narrow-lidded barflies.

"Does anybody know Dan Purdy?" she asked hopefully.

One or two shifted uneasily at the mention of the name, but there was no reply. Her hopes sank. At the door she turned.

"If any of you see him, you might say that Jim Lord wants him."

Her words brought the tall, white-haired man at the bar to a stiffening attitude. He came forward with the easy tread of a cougar, his temples still seeming to bristle.

"I'm yore huckleberry, ma'am," he said tersely. "Where is he?"

"Follow me," she said, noting the twin guns snugging against the man's thighs, tied down hard.

His cobalt blue eyes were like chips of glacial ice. There was determination in the cut of his blue-colored jowls. Here was a fighting man, as her father had been—a man like Jim Lord, afraid of nothing, ready always for fight or frolic.

THE Box B loyalists accepted Dan Purdy on sight. Nor did the lean, grayed oldster waste time in idle talk. He pulled a deep-chested bay from the tie-rack as they mounted and fell in with the cavalcade beside Bonnie. They left Hidalgo behind in a cloud of dust.

Bonnie heard Buck Thornton's grunt of surprise as the new foreman regarded Purdy from his saddle.

"So yuh're Dan Purdy?" He seemed incredulous. "I had my eyes on yuh all the time. Amazes me yuh didn't do some arrestin' for what happened."

Dan Purdy grinned. "We ain't interested in dead snakes, Thornton," he rumbled good-naturedly. "Besides, Flynn pulled his cutter first. It was self-defense."

"Why, you talk like an officer of the law, Mr. Purdy," Bonnie breathed.

Purdy chuckled. "That's exactly what I am, Miss Bradford," he told her. "I'm a United States Marshal, sent here to put the deadwood on a Black Market that's been hurtin' our war effort."

His words touched off a swelling roar in her veins.

"You mean—" she began, but that unruffled, pleasant chuckle interrupted.

"Shore," Purdy said. "I had my eyes on Flynn. He was a go-between for Slade Trimball in a bootleg beef market and from what I gather, yore dad was a heavy loser in prime steers. Flynn was spottin' good meat for Trimball an' the cattle dealer was shovin' it through on the United States Army under blotted brands."

"You knew my father?" Bonnie was almost speechless.

"Like I know my own hands, ma'am," Purdy said. "We were kids together and yuh're a chip off the old block. But it took Jim Lord to wiggle his way into Trimball's confidence and get at the bottom of the racket."

Bonnie's blood hammered at her temples.

"Jim Lord?" That was all she could say.

"There's a man with brains, ma'am," Purdy praised. "Before I picked him up he was a trick roper at Cheyenne. I figgered any man so quick with his hands as him must have an equally active head. He's my best deputy. He's the one who ran down Slade Trimball as the leader of the Black Market meat producers. I'm just playin' second fiddle to him in this case, but it'll be a bass note for Trimball's funeral if we can grab him red-handed rustlin' stuff and throwin' it on the market as bootleg meat, robbin' the people and cheatin' the United States."

Bonnie heard all that through tears of happiness and self-condemnation. Her doubts of Jim Lord were thorns to her spirit now.

"This Trimball jasper," Purdy went on, "aimed to take over yore ranch as a blind to hide his dirty business. We just found out today, definite, what he was doin' and what he was up to. But we had to have real evidence against Slade to put him where he belongs. We were too late on one thing, I reckon." His hand closed over hers with steadying comfort. "I'm powerful sorry, ma'am, that we couldn't have stopped the killin' of yore father."

He gave his attention to the men. She noted the way they met it, apprehensively, but with stoical resignation.

"You boys ain't a pretty lot," he said. "And I know some of yuh've dangled a long loop a few times in yore lives, but that don't interest me. It's what yuh do from here on that does. There'll probably be shootin'. When we meet up with Trimball and his gang, pick yore targets and burn powder. The United States is backin' yuh now. There they come!"

The polyglot crewmen of the Box B relaxed.

Bonnie saw glances exchanged, toothy grins flash in the moonlight. There was a quickening of pace.

The herd in the distance took shape rapidly now. Bonnie could see the mass of tossing horns and the wild, flashing eyes of the leaders as they were rushed forward at a run. The ground began to tremble under the pound of hoofs.

"Split up, men!" Dan Purdy yelled suddenly. "You all know Jim Lord. Don't line yore sights on him. Hub Crandall gunned yore boss and Trimball gave him the orders. Jim Lord knew that but he didn't want to tip his hand till we could grab the whole gang. And remember—yuh're still workin' for a Bradford as well as Uncle Sam."

Bonnie rode with Purdy's half of the crew, against his orders. He didn't have time to make her stay out of it, and there was something in her eyes that told him it wouldn't have done any good to try.

The muffled, savage crashing of guns reached them from across the herd before her detachment found targets. Mike Lopez, his teeth flashing like ivory in the moonlight, waved a gun in either hand. They looked too big for him. He grinned at the lawman.

"The rurales would geeve their eye-teeth to see me now, Senor Dan," he said. "I who have dealt them much misery, ees now ee-shooting for law an' order, no?"

He laughed and lead whistled a dirge of death about him. But he paid no attention and his guns grew hot in his small hands.

Indian Joe, reins in his teeth, was like an avenging angel, here, there, everywhere, gunsmoke blooming from his gun muzzles, the turkey feather in his sombrero waving in the wind. The others were silent gray ghosts, spitting fire as they rode.

Through the choking dust screen the herd passed them like a flowing sea of tawny brown. Bonnie's eyes smarted as she rode with her men and Purdy. The lawman's guns exploded at her side, making her jump, then all were angling to the left, cutting between the herd and the rustlers hazing it.

THREE-FINGERED JACK loomed from the murk and fired. Bonnie's horse leaped away from a near collision with him. Jack's fire cut her and Purdy was on him, chopping down with a gun that caught him dully across the head, emptying his saddle.

"Reward money on the hoof!" the lawman yelled. "Like choppin' kindlin' wood!"

Trimball's men were pulling up, firing wildly. Indian Joe pulled triggers and one of the renegade's guns were stilled forever. Bonnie heard Mike Lopez swearing roundly in Spanish, keeping time with his deadly shooting, off to the right. For a moment it was a pitched battle, each side sitting bucking mounts and pouring lead.

Then she heard Jim Lord's cold command ahead of her. He was facing Slade Trimball, gun leveled.

"Pitch up, Trimball," he ordered. "Or take it in the brisket!"

The Hidalgo gun-boss cast his gun away—and with the same motion flung a sleeve-hidden derringer forward into his fingers. Bonnie fired instinctively.

There was a moment when her heart stood still. Then it was abruptly quiet. The herd was gone into the middle ranges, to run itself out and be rounded up late.

Trimball cursed luridly as he stared at his gun-hand, minus its fingers. Jim Lord gigged up to him, dangling handcuffs, while Dan Purdy closed in on the others who had quit. Buck Thornton and Indian Joe came in with Cartright and Stagg, the latter nursing a bullet-torn shoulder.

Purdy's head came up suddenly. "Where's Hub Crandall?" he demanded. "There's a reward for him."

"Reward?" Mike Lopez lifted the muzzles of his big guns and blew the acrid powder-smoke from them. "I theenk, Senor, I weel turn eet down. Eet ees no honor to keel a skunk. *Es verdad?*"

Jim Lord pulled Bonnie from her saddle to inspect the red crease along her arm where Three-finger's lead had left its mark. He bound it carefully with a clean handkerchief. She was aware of the men and prisoners alike watching her, and then she wasn't, for Jim was kissing her. She snuggled closer into his arms and together they entered their own little world.

No words were spoken. None were necessary. Each knew the answers.

●

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Johnny Thor leaped suddenly, smashing his fist savagely into Blalock's face

DESERT GAMBLE

By GUNNISON STEELE

In a wilderness of heat and burning sand, a bounty-hunting lawman has the tables turned on him neatly when he takes a crooked trail

JOHNNY THOR crouched in the dust-choked shadows of the cave-like fissure where he and Reef Blalock had taken refuge, and stared bitterly out at the storm-lashed world. He could see only a few yards, for the sand, driven by a howling wind, rolled in thick yellow curtains out of the south. They were away from the wind here, but Thor could hear it, and feel its savage force against the rock walls that sheltered them.

Slender, red-haired Johnny Thor licked dry lips, glanced at Reef Blalock. Blalock was a lanky, slablike man, with pale eyes and dark, hawkish features—a deputy sheriff back in the cowtown of Skytooth. He was as tough, relentless and implacable as the desert itself, but now he was as thirsty and miserable as Johnny Thor was. He was watching Thor warily.

"Look, Blalock," Johnny Thor said thickly. "I'm not guilty of murder—you know that. I broke jail and hightailed into the desert because I found out they

aimed to frame me into a hang-noose back there in that wolf town."

"So what?" Blalock sneered.

"So I've got a proposition to make yuh. In yore safe in Skytooth is a wad of money—nearly four hundred dollars—money yuh took from me when yuh locked me up. In the livery stable is my sorrel geldin', and a hundred-dollar saddle. I'll write yuh out a receipt, givin' yuh the whole shebang if yuh'll turn me loose."

"How could yuh do that—and you supposed to be dead?"

"I could date it a week ago, before I broke jail, and yuh could say I wrote it out then . . . Well, what yuh say?"

"I dunno. There's my duty. Yuh killed a man—"

"Shore, I did, and he needed killin'," Thor said. "I was ridin' across the range one day, and blundered right into a ruckus. A couple of skunks had an old man, a nester, down on the ground before his shack and was kickin' and beatin' him. They'd have killed him, if I hadn't horned in. There was a gun ruckus, and I killed one of said skunks. The other one got on his bronc and high-tailed.

"I didn't know till later that the gent I'd killed was Ben Jarret, son of old Iron Mike Jarret, who owns half the Skytooth range. But it wouldn't have made any difference. Even after yuh jailed me, I figgered I wouldn't have any trouble goin' free.

"But I soon found out different. Old Iron Mike plumb owns the law back there. He swore he'd see me hang for killin' his son, and he already had the jury picked and paid. I wouldn't have had a chance. So I broke jail . . . Now, what yuh say about that proposition?"

DEPUTY REEF BLALOCK'S laugh was a low, cruel sound above the howl of the wind and sand.

"I say yuh're loco. Look—there're a few things yuh don't know about this. When yuh broke jail, old Iron Mike went wild. He offered a five-thousand-dollar reward for yuh, alive, so's he could see yuh hang. But that ain't all. The day after yuh busted outa jail, some of Iron Mike's riders—all likkered up—jumped somebody they thought was you over in the hills. This gent, not knowin' what it was all about, holed up in an old shack. Iron Mike's waddies tried to smoke him—and the fool stayed in there and burned with the cabin. See the joke?"

Johnny Thor shook his head. "I don't see any joke."

"Why, them rannies took what was left of that hombre to Iron Mike and told him it was Johnny Thor." The deputy laughed hoarsely. "'Course, they couldn't collect the reward, though, 'cause they was supposed to bring yuh in alive. I'm the only man alive who knows it was a saddle-tramp, instead of you, that died in that shack. I'd uncovered sign that told me yuh'd headed into the desert. So I kept my mouth shut, and started after yuh. And now yuh see why I don't give a hoot about that four hundred dollars of yores, and yore hoss and saddle. I aim to collect that five thousand bounty!"

Johnny Thor was quiet a moment, staring bitterly at Blalock. He had the gaunt deputy sized up. He was crooked, cruel, greedy.

"Would yuh hang an innocent man for five thousand dollars?" Thor asked.

"For five thousand dollars," Blalock said, "I would hang a hundred innocent men!"

Johnny Thor swore, drawing his legs up under him. Blalock grinned, fingering his gun.

"I wouldn't," he said. "I won't kill yuh, because yuh'd be worthless that way, but I'd come so close to it yuh'd wish yuh was dead!"

Thor relaxed. Blalock had him cold.

He huddled there, his mind going back over the last few weeks. A Texas cowboy with an itchy foot, he had just been crossing the Skytooth range when he had come upon the two tough hombres brutally beating the old man before his nester cabin. Mad clear through, he had barged in, and when the two tough ones had chosen gunsmoke he had more than matched them. He had ridden into town with the body of the man he had killed, and his tale of how it had happened—and before he could recover from his surprise he had found himself in jail.

Quickly, it had become plain that old "Iron Mike" Jarret, known all around as a land hog, meant to take vengeance for the killing of his wildling son. So one night Johnny Thor had pried the bars from his cell window and escaped.

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of folks lived in the West and never got into trouble. If there was trouble around they just didn't mix into it. But history teaches us that there was plenty of trouble around in those old rough-and-ready Western days.

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There's a flock of other letters, including one from Pvt. Herman J. Ahrens, and another from Pvt. John Mykluz, who tell us that POPULAR WESTERN is their favorite magazine. Thanks, boys!

Everybody—why not join POPULAR WESTERN Club if you haven't done so up to now? Just get busy and fill out the coupon in this department and mail it in with a stamped and self-addressed return envelope for your membership card. There are no dues or fees. The club is just a friendly get-together of Western fans, giving all of you an opportunity to pop questions about the West to Old Doc Trail.

We'll be back next time with the roundup of new stories to come and more mail. Until then—keep 'em flying with your purchases of War Stamps and Bonds.

—THE EDITOR.

THE CIRCLE 7 CRIME

(Concluded from page 53)

clutch, made uncertain by the clumsy, bandaged hand.

"Whew!" Doc Crabtree said.

Then he leaned back and peeled off his glasses and laid them on the table. He had learned a lot and seen a lot in a few crowded, death-fraught seconds. But he was the only one present who knew that Crawly Pete was sick abed with fever upstairs, too sick to get up for even the most heroic urgency.

He polished his specs in a tag end of bandage gauze and propped them back on his nose.

"All right, boys," he said briskly. "Who's next?"

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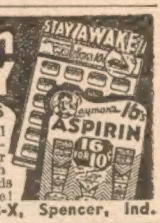

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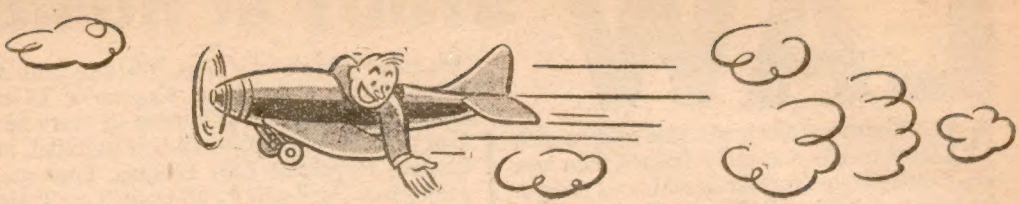

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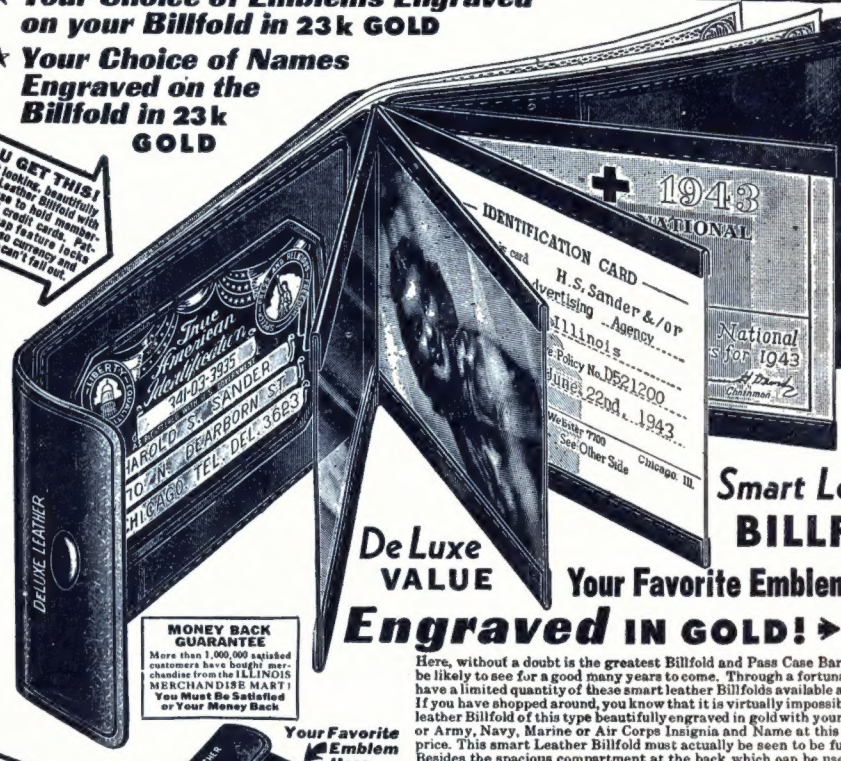

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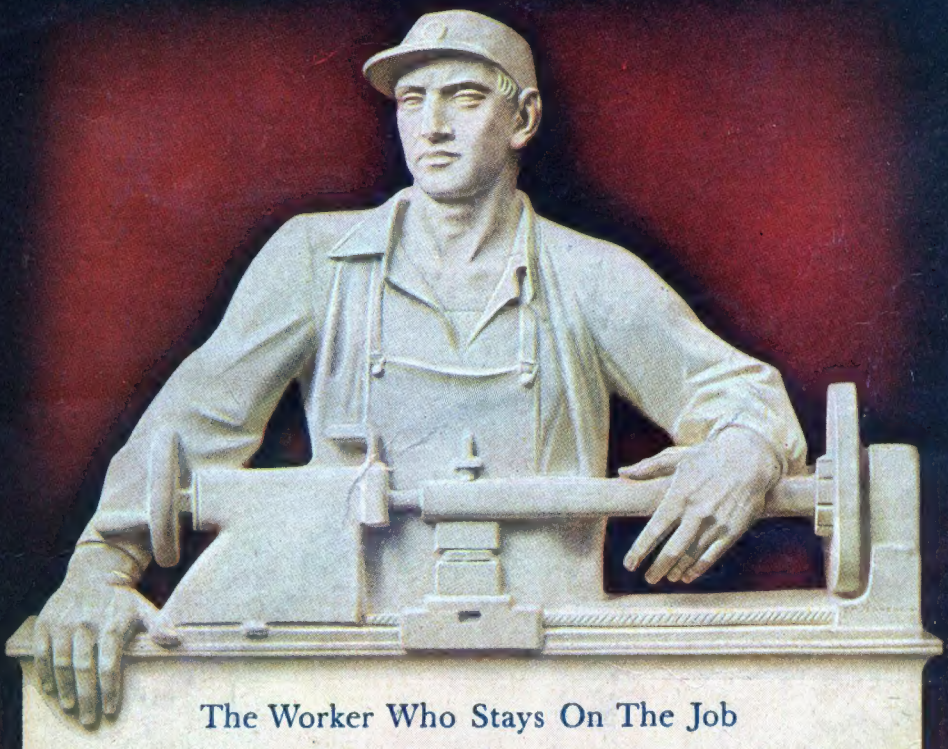

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